HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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18 June 2018
Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness

1. Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of homelessness. [905877]

   The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government believe that one person without a home is one too many, which is why we have committed £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and why we implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in April. We are producing a cross-Government strategy to tackle rough sleeping, and it is due to be published next month.

   Colleen Fletcher: In December 2010, there were 22 homeless households in temporary accommodation in Coventry; in December last year, there was a massive 278 homeless households in the city, of which 210 were families with children, with a total of 505 children between them. Why does the Secretary of State think that the number of homeless children has risen so significantly under this Government?

   James Brokenshire: I hope the hon. Lady will recognise the work that the Government have done and are doing with the commitment of £9 billion for affordable housing. This is partly an issue of supply and ensuring that we have the right number of homes, which is why the Government are taking action, investing and seeking to respond to the challenges of homelessness and, indeed, rough sleeping. I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the Housing First initiative in the west midlands to tackle rough sleeping and ensure that we really respond to this important issue.

   Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): A recent Crisis report set out a comprehensive and practical plan for ending homelessness. On top of the excellent plans that the Secretary of State has already announced, I encourage him to work with Crisis so that we can tackle not only homelessness but its underlying causes.

   James Brokenshire: I congratulate Crisis on its work, as it marks its 50th anniversary. Indeed, I spoke at the recent Crisis conference, where I indicated that I will work with the organisation on furthering its rough-sleeping initiatives, about which I have spoken. I note what it has said about homelessness and will continue to work with it and others.

   16. [905894] Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): There are many trends from the 1990s that I would like to bring back to this country—for example, decent indie music—but rough sleeping is not one of them. I pay tribute to the Forest emergency night shelter in Waltham Forest, which helped 109 people in just one borough this past winter. The truth is, though, that the problem continues, and tonight approximately 40 people will sleep rough in a graveyard in Walthamstow. I invite the Secretary of State to come with me to meet those people to understand how he can finally get a grip of this situation and get a roof over their heads.
James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady rightly speaks passionately about rough sleeping. I feel very strongly about it, too, which was why my first visit as Secretary of State was to a homelessness charity in Birmingham that was actively supporting people who were rough sleeping. That is why the Government are committed to eradicating rough sleeping and why, in recent weeks, we have committed a further £30 million to those areas most affected. It is a very serious issue and the hon. Lady is right to be passionate about it, as am I.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome last week’s news that there will be £279,000 extra for tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in Torbay. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that the lessons from the previous pilot, which was carried out with the Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign, will be incorporated into the strategy that he is bringing out next month?

James Brokenshire: I commend the work that my hon. Friend’s local charities have done, along with all the organisations that are working locally in Torbay on this significant issue. Obviously, additional funding has been identified. Part of the issue is to ensure that that money is used effectively by learning from previous lessons and, indeed, by ensuring that local authorities are held to account for the moneys that have been applied.

High-rise Buildings: Cladding

2. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of high-rise residential buildings that have had dangerous cladding removed and replaced since the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): As of 22 May, remediation had started on 107 buildings over 18 metres in the social sector that were identified to have combinations of aluminium composite material cladding and insulation that failed fire-performance tests. Work has been completed on 10 buildings.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that update, but will he give a timescale for the other tower blocks, in both the private and the public sectors? What is the timescale for the removal of these dangerous panels?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the clear desire and intent to see to it that these buildings are made safe and that remediation is completed at the earliest possible opportunity. The works are complex and detailed, and they will take time. We continue to monitor and to work with local authorities to make sure that progress is made, recognising the real public safety issues that the hon. Gentleman underlines.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is rightly consulting on banning all material that is not of limited combustibility from high-rise buildings, and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee hopes that he will bring in such a ban after the consultation. If he concludes that it is right to ban such material from all new buildings, does he accept that it would be completely untenable to leave the same material on existing buildings, and, in such a case, does he accept that the Government will have the responsibility to financially compensate the building owners affected?

James Brokenshire: The Chair of the Select Committee will know that we have committed £400 million to support the public sector in remediation costs and that, therefore, we are committed to seeing that the work is undertaken well. Obviously, we will reflect carefully on the consultation that will be launched and therefore look at its application. The key message is that we need to make progress and to get on with this, so that buildings that have been identified in need of remediation are dealt with.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pay tribute to all of the Grenfell survivors and the people in that area whose dignified commemorations we all witnessed last week. There remains an issue about people in high-rise buildings in the private sector. What response has the Secretary of State made to Kevin Stewart MSP, Scotland’s Housing Minister, on his calls to exempt private buildings from VAT on materials to refurbish these buildings?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, that is a matter for the Treasury, but there is a need to make progress, and I look forward to continuing discussions with the Scottish Government. Equally, the hon. Lady has said, I pay tribute to the incredible community of Grenfell for the extraordinary way in which they underlined the strength that they have together and how that has brought the country together as well and how we must very firmly continue to have that in mind.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. He will have seen, as we all have, the pictures from Glasgow over the weekend where the Glasgow School of Art also had a devastating fire. Fortunately, there was no loss of life, although local residents are still waiting to get back into their homes. Does he agree that we need to look again at exemptions for sprinkler systems in buildings, so that more public buildings can be encouraged to have them installed, not least in the building that we are in today, because it is built in a similar way to the Glasgow School of Art and could be as dangerous?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that we were all horrified to see the terrible fire at the Glasgow School of Art. We should think about what that iconic building has meant to so many people over the years. The hon. Lady highlights the issue of sprinklers. May I be clear on that: for existing buildings, it is for the building owner to decide whether to fit sprinklers retrospectively, as part of a fire safety strategy? Obviously, it is for building owners to make those determinations, but, clearly, it can be an effective safety measure, as part of an overarching strategy.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you and I and other Members of the House were privileged to be part of the Grenfell silent walk with survivors and supporters last Thursday. They, like this House, want Ministers to take every action necessary to prevent such a fire ever happening again, yet, since Grenfell, 1,319 suspect cladding samples sent to the
Government's testing centre have been refused testing, as Ministers say that they will only test the aluminium composite material the Minister spoke of earlier. Why?

**James Brokenshire:** I will happily look into what the right hon. Gentleman has said. The Building Research Establishment's focus has obviously been on the ACM material that has been at the forefront of concerns to ensure that, in both the public and the private sectors, that can be tested so that where cladding does not meet the necessary standards, it is dealt with and remediation steps take place. I will certainly look in greater detail at the point that he has made.

**John Healey:** That simply is not good enough from the Secretary of State. The BRE does what Ministers tell it to do. We know that other cladding and insulation materials have been found unsafe. We know that the Hackitt review has confirmed that the whole building regulation system from end to end is, as she says, not fit for purpose. Since Grenfell, Ministers have been too slow to take responsibility and too slow to act. This Conservative dogma of “hands off” is delaying the Government action necessary to deal with this national disaster. Will he give local authorities powers to demand that testing and recladding are actually done? Will he release the details that he holds on tower block owners who will not do this work, and will he set a deadline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) says, for all landlords to make their buildings safe or make it clear that Government will step in and then make them?

**James Brokenshire:** I firmly recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the urgency of the situation, which is why we have committed an additional £1 million to local authorities to identify the sites. In my time as Secretary of State, we have made an additional commitment of £400 million to the social sector to ensure that we get on with this remediation. I am intent on pursuing that level of action and focus to ensure that a sense of safety and assurance is given. Since the publication of Judith Hackitt’s report, I have announced that we are pursuing a consultation to bring into effect a ban on combustible cladding. The right hon. Gentleman has said. The Building Research Establishment’s focus has obviously been on the ACM material the Minister spoke of earlier. Why?

**Ruth Smeeth:** The Secretary of State fails to point out that only 199 houses have been built in the past six months. Given his failure to build new housing, can we instead look at actions to deal with the 7,253 privately owned empty houses in Stoke-on-Trent?

**James Brokenshire:** More affordable homes have been delivered in the past seven years than in the last seven years of the last Labour Government. It is a bit rich to press us when we have delivered 217,000 completed new homes in the past year. This Government have committed £9 billion to affordable homes—the hon. Lady should reflect on that—as this issue is our priority.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Government have recently announced an extra £2 billion into the affordable homes programme. How many more homes for social rent should this provide by the end of this Parliament?

**James Brokenshire:** We have identified additional funding for affordable homes and social rent. I will be making a further announcement regarding what this means outside London. I will return to the House to update Members on the matter, as I recognise its importance.

**Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I thank you and Members of all parties who supported the Grenfell community by attending memorial services and the silent walk, by speaking in the House and by wearing the green heart. Will the Secretary of State politely insist that all Members who have shown support by wearing the green heart support my request for a Backbench Business debate, so that we can discuss all these issues in one place and discuss the Grenfell response? We have a list of green heart wearers and will be writing to the Secretary of State today. Will he please show that he cares by supporting my debate?

**James Brokenshire:** I commend the hon. Lady. For the work that she has done locally, as I commend the strength of her community in the face of this appalling tragedy. I cannot speak about the awarding of Backbench Business debates. If she seeks one, I am sure that it will be considered carefully. We have updated the House regularly on the response to Grenfell, and we will continue to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** The Secretary of State is quite right to disavow responsibility for the Backbench Business Committee. The hon. Lady could, however, usefully slide up to and have a word with the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who chairs that Committee. He is not in his place at the moment, but I dare say that he will be in due course. I am sure that she will find that a most useful conversation.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that North West Leicestershire District Council is building the first new council houses in my constituency in the past 30 years?

**James Brokenshire:** I absolutely do. I commend the work of my hon. Friend’s council. We are looking at how we can strengthen the housing revenue account...
further and see a new generation of council house builds. I commend his local authority for getting on with that.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just talked of his affordable homes record, but we all know that this Government’s definition of affordable homes is a joke. It allows an illusion of genuinely affordable house building, which is simply not happening. Many of his own Back Benchers agree, and 10 of them are meeting the Prime Minister on Wednesday to call for more genuinely affordable homes. The number of new social rented homes funded by the Government is at its lowest ever level, with fewer than 1,000 started last year. Will the Secretary of State therefore match Labour’s commitment, in our social housing green paper, to scrap the bogus definition of affordable rent at up to 80% of market rents and to invest in genuinely affordable homes?

James Brokenshire: I hope that the hon. Lady will welcome the fall in housing waiting lists under this Government. I say to her very clearly that steps have been taken under this Government to respond to this challenge. I remind her again of the £9 billion that has been committed to affordable homes, with the change that that will bring to so many people in actually creating the vision of a home and making that a reality. That is this Government’s intent, and it is something that we will deliver.

Housing and Community Integration

4. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to provide people who have recently been granted asylum with support for housing and community integration. [905880]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): On 8 June, the Department announced £1.75 million to help new refugees by funding 35 offices in 19 areas of England with some of the highest numbers of asylum seekers. This will support people granted asylum into housing, learning and work. The Department is very keen to share this learning widely, including with the devolved Administrations.

Tommy Sheppard: The Government’s consultation report, “Integrated Communities”, said that the Government will “work with civil society and others to increase the integration support available to those recognised as refugees after arrival in the UK.” What specific measures are being taken to ensure that newly recognised refugees get the same support as resettled refugees?

Nigel Adams: Funding for the pilot programmes is drawn from the controlling migration fund, which has no remit to finance the devolved Administrations, as funding is devolved in this area. The pilot programmes are now recruiting staff and getting their programmes up and running. The pilots will run for two years. They are funded in the first year by my Department and in the second year by the council itself.

Local Authority Funding: North-east

5. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government funding for local authorities in the north-east since 2010. [905881]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): From 2015-16 to 2019-20, north-east councils will have access to £11.3 billion in core spending power. The 2018-19 settlement sees a 1.9% increase in the money available to north-east councils.

Mr Hepburn: The Minister will be aware that north-east councils have had a 50% cut in Government grant since 2010. At the same time, the richest individuals in this country have had a £10 billion tax cut. Does he think it is right that these needless tax cuts are paid for by local government jobs, pay cuts and the loss of local government services?

Jake Berry: On the subject of those who can afford it building up savings, I might point out to the hon. Gentleman that his local authority—I remind him, as I am sure he knows, that every seat except one is held by the Labour party—has increased its reserves by £7 million since 2010, so perhaps he should be addressing his questions on redundancies and closures to the local Labour party.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister knows that the slashing of funding for Newcastle City Council can be seen in the increased litter on our streets, increased crime rates as youth services are cut and reduced public services generally. What will he say to my constituents who want to know why central Government care so little for their wellbeing?

Jake Berry: On whether central Government care for people in Newcastle, I would say that surely they, like the hon. Lady, should welcome the £600 million of new money provided for the devolution deal; the Great Exhibition of the North, opening this Friday, which is set to boost her local economy by £184 million; the Budget announcement of £337 million for the Tyne and Wear Metro; north-east local enterprise partnerships having £379 million invested in them directly; and the north-east investment fund just announced, with £120 million. This is a golden era of Government investment in the north-east, but it takes the Conservative party to deliver it.

Adult Social Care

6. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the ability of local authorities to deliver their statutory duties for adult social care. [905882]

14. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the ability of local authorities to deliver their statutory duties for adult social care. [905891]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): As part of the Ministry’s oversight of local government, we
consider the financial stability and service delivery of individual authorities, liaising with the Department of Health and Social Care on adult social care. On that basis, we have no immediate concerns about the ability of local authorities to fulfil their statutory duties.

**Liz McInnes:** Wow! I am shocked by that response. This year’s precept of 1% raises only 0.8% of our total adult social care budget in the Borough of Rochdale. With nursing home beds being converted into residential beds because of providers’ difficulties in recruiting and retaining nurses, how does the Minister suggest that my local authority provides the nursing home beds that my constituents so desperately need?

**Rishi Sunak:** This Government have increased funding for social care across the country. Rather than talking down the hon. Lady’s constituency and local authority, I point out that Rochdale’s performance in reducing delayed transfers of care is among the best in the country and deserves praise, rather than being talked down.

**Liz Twist:** This weekend we heard the announcement of additional funding for the NHS, but there was no mention of funding to resolve the issues in social care as part of that package. What discussions were there with the Secretary of State about the future funding of social care? As part of that package. What discussions were there with the Secretary of State about the future funding of social care in advance of that announcement?

**Rishi Sunak:** This Government want to guarantee the security and dignity of people in old age and are absolutely committed to providing a long-term sustainable settlement on social care, on which the hon. Lady will know the Health Secretary is working. He will bring forward plans in due course.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Some 1.2 million older people in England are living with unmet care needs, according to Age UK. More than 400,000 fewer people are receiving publicly funded social care than in 2010. Council spending on adult social care fell by 10% in real terms between 2010 and 2015. A miserly £150 million in funding was announced for 2018-19 in the local government finance settlement, and now we hear that there is no funding for social care in yesterday’s NHS announcement. With social care in crisis, putting pressure on the NHS and sending councils across England towards bankruptcy, when is this Minister going to do his job and secure the resources that our councils need to give the elderly the dignity they so desperately deserve?

**Rishi Sunak:** This Government are already responding to the pressures in social care, which is why we announced £2 billion in last year’s Budget for local authorities up and down the country. That represents a real-terms increase every year from last year to next year in social care spending, and we are seeing it translate into action on the ground, with a 40% reduction in social care delayed transfers of care just last month.

### Social Housing

7. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the building of new social housing.

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**The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab):** We have delivered 357,000 affordable homes since 2010, which is more than in the last seven years of the previous Labour Government, and we will be spending £9 billion on affordable housing, including social housing, until 2022.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Will the Minister join me in thanking housing associations across the country for all the great work they do on social housing, and in particular Rooftop Housing in my constituency, which has built 850 homes in the last six years, including substantial housing for elderly people and those with supportive care needs?

**Dominic Raab:** Housing associations played a key role in delivering more than 41,000 homes through the affordable homes programme last year. I certainly welcome the contribution of housing associations in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We are restless to do more, through measures such as long-term rent certainty and raising the housing revenue account borrowing cap.

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that for many people on low incomes, paying 80% of market rent is not affordable—it is simply unaffordable? When will the Government ditch this twisted notion of affordability and build more homes for social rent?

**Dominic Raab:** We are lifting the HRA borrowing cap. We are giving local authorities and housing associations longer-term certainty with their rents, and we also look forward to the publication of the social housing Green Paper, to address all these issues in the round.

**Mr Speaker:** I must say to the Minister that on Saturday at the Buckingham literary festival I met one of his constituents, and I told the constituent that the hon. Gentleman was a clever fellow.

19. [905898] **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to speed up the local planning process and make it more about delivering affordable housing and new homes than about narrow local or petty partisan politics?

**Dominic Raab:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words.

Through the changes that we are making to the national planning policy framework, we want to streamline the process to get homes built and, particularly through our emphasis on the housing delivery test, to make sure that homes are built for the next generation.

21. [905909] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): There is growing interest on the Opposition side of the House in funding social housing through land value uplift. Does the Minister have any plans to introduce a land value cap within the lifetime of this Parliament?

**Dominic Raab:** I certainly welcome the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts, and we have heard such ideas on our side of the House as well. I would be very happy to see any proposals he has, and we would certainly take them very seriously.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): To enable developers to build the right proportion of affordable housing, it is essential that they have the money for infrastructure. In that respect, I welcome the £7.6 million we have received for the spine road in Staplegrove. When will we know whether £18 million of funding will be announced following the joint bid by my council and Sedgemoor?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. The housing infrastructure fund is absolutely vital because people rightly ask local authorities with the ambition to build new homes where the roads, schools and clinics will come from. We are taking forward a whole range of bids for co-development. The business proposals will be analysed by my Department, and we will make further announcements in the autumn.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Ministry’s own figures show that, at the end of 2014, the number of households in temporary accommodation in Bromley stood at 956, and by December 2017, the figure had risen to 1,501. There are simply not enough affordable homes in London, so when will the Government take real action to make sure that councils such as Bromley get building?

Dominic Raab: We are raising the HRA cap to give local authorities more flexibility to enable them to deliver the homes. The hon. Lady may also want to have a word with the Mayor of London, because we want the ambition from central Government taken right the way through. She is right to mention local councils, but we must also make sure that city hall is doing its bit.

Brownfield Regeneration

8. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to enable local authorities to prioritise brownfield regeneration.

Nigel Adams: The Government do not have the ability to force local authorities to build on brownfield sites. I am sure we can write to the hon. Gentleman to get specific details of the needs of his local authority area.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Ministry’s own figures show that, at the end of 2014, the number of households in temporary accommodation in Bromley stood at 956, and by December 2017, the figure had risen to 1,501. There are simply not enough affordable homes in London, so when will the Government take real action to make sure that councils such as Bromley get building?

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): This Government are continuing to identify ways to ensure that local authorities make full and efficient use of brownfield land, including through changing the national planning policy framework, supporting the reuse of buildings through permitted development rights, and requiring every authority to publish and maintain a register of brownfield land suitable for housing.

Mr Jayawardena: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that answer, but what progress has been made in giving Homes England the powers and resources it needs to acquire sites in fragmented ownership in order to deliver regeneration for our communities?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. She will no doubt be aware of the protections in that policy framework. Members to remind their local authorities that there are protections in that policy framework.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Recent figures from the Campaign to Protect Rural England show that the amount of farmland, forest, gardens and greenfield land lost to development each year has increased by 58% over the past four years. What are the Government going to do to better protect our vital green spaces and redevelop our brownfield sites, which are so urgently in need of regeneration?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. She will no doubt be aware of the protections in the NPPF to ensure that green-belt and greenfield sites are protected. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to remind their local authorities that there are protections in that policy framework.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Minister will know, I recently wrote to the Secretary of State to make a strong case for calling in a decision made by Labour-controlled Bradford Council to build 500 houses on the green belt in Burley in Wharfedale in my constituency. Given that Bradford’s Telegraph & Argus has reported today that Bradford Council is taking out of the plan a brownfield site in the city centre where more than 600 houses would have been built so that it can be used as a car park until at least 2024, will the Minister confirm that there can clearly not be “exceptional circumstances” to justify building 500 houses on the green belt in Burley in Wharfedale?

Nigel Adams: I am afraid that I have not read this morning’s Telegraph & Argus and seen that particular news; I shall try to get a copy by the end of today. I am sure that my hon. Friend realises that I cannot comment
specifically on such a case. I understand that my colleague the Minister for Housing will be writing to him in very short order.

Northern Powerhouse

9. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on the delivery of the northern powerhouse. [905886]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We are delivering economic growth across the northern powerhouse by devolving more power and investing more than any Government in history in our transport infrastructure. That is why, since the northern powerhouse was launched, we have grown the northern economy by £20 billion.

Mike Amesbury: Cheshire West and Chester Council, Cheshire East Council, Warrington Borough Council, the local enterprise partnership and other stakeholders are determined in their quest to secure a devolution deal, yet increasingly frustrated. Will the Minister update the House on the timetable for the deal?

Jake Berry: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, all the councils he mentions and the LEP have brought out what they refer to as the prospectus for growth, which is looking at how they can deliver real economic benefits for the people who live in Warrington and elsewhere in Cheshire. The Government remain open to ground-up locally supported devolution deals. I encourage the hon. Gentleman, the council leaders and the LEP to continue the discussions they have been having with me and my officials.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Last Friday it was announced that Siemens had won the contract for the new Piccadilly line trains and will now invest £200 million in a new train factory in Goole, creating 700 jobs—so not all investment in the south turns out to be all that terrible. However, can we make sure that the Department and the Minister in particular work with Siemens to ensure that the supply chain benefits the Department and the Minister in particular work with him and my officials.

Jake Berry: It takes a former northern powerhouse Minister to remind the current one that those new trains built in my hon. Friend’s constituency in Goole must benefit the entirety of the north of England. I will work with him to make sure that happens.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Should not the Government Front-Bench team learn this truth: that since the departure of the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, there has been no vision, no leadership and no result for the northern powerhouse? Can the Minister not provide some real leadership and let us catch up with some of these soft people in the south of England and London who get all the investment?

Jake Berry: I am torn: I find myself partially agreeing with the hon. Gentleman, although I certainly do not agree that there has been no vision or leadership on the northern powerhouse. Since I became Minister we have announced a “minded to” deal for a North of Tyne combined authority, we have reaffirmed the commitment to the north Wales growth deal, we have announced that we intend to do a growth deal in the borderlands and the last Budget included £1.8 billion of new money going to the north of England.

Midlands Engine

10. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [905887]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We recently launched the £250 million midlands engine investment fund and agreed a second devolution deal with the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street. We have also given £4 million to the midlands engine partnership to support a range of economic activity, including that of our very important ceramics sector.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. How best can we encourage new businesses into town centres in the midlands, like those in Longton and Fenton in my constituency, so we can see the revival of our high streets?

Jake Berry: The future health of our high streets is extremely important, which is why I am pleased to be able to announce today that my Department will launch a call for evidence over the summer looking at the future of our high street. We intend to establish an expert panel to diagnose the issues currently affecting the high street. I will be visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency shortly. I hope Longton and Fenton will make their voices heard.

Local Authorities: Children’s Services

11. Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the long-term financial viability of local authorities of the use of their reserves to fund children’s services. [905888]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Settlement funding has increased in recognition of pressures, including demand for children’s services. In addition, many local authorities have built up substantial reserves over recent years. It is absolutely right that they use those where necessary to protect high quality services for taxpayers.

Ms Rimmer: Baby P, Victoria Climbié, Shannon Matthews—I am sure the House remembers those names. Child safety is a major concern right across our country, with councils starting no fewer than 500 child protection investigations a day. St Helens Council has almost twice as many looked-after children as the national average and has pulled £5 million from reserves to fund their care. That is unsustainable. Does the Minister really realise what is at stake? What will the Minister do to ensure that councils have the money they need to support our vulnerable children, instead of washing his hands of this?
Rishi Sunak: This Government have ensured that all local authorities have increased resources to deal with all the various services they have to provide, including children's services, on which, I am pleased to say, over £9 billion will be spent this year. The hon. Lady mentions reserves. She may know that last year reserves in her local authority were actually higher than they were five years ago.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment has he made of the ability of vulnerable children.

Rishi Sunak: As I just said, £9 billion is going to children's services just this year. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are undertaking a fresh review of the relative needs and resources of all local authorities. As part of that work, there is ongoing work with the Department for Education to understand in detail the specific drivers for children's services up and down the country. I look forward to his contributions to that piece of work.

Local Authorities: Vulnerable Children

12. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the ability of local authorities to discharge their statutory responsibilities to vulnerable children.

15. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the ability of local authorities to discharge their statutory responsibilities to vulnerable children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Her Majesty's chief inspector of education, children's services and skills is responsible for the inspection of local authority children's services. Last year, spending on the most vulnerable children increased to over £9 billion. I very much welcome the efforts of colleagues in the Department for Education and in local councils, who continually look for ways to improve their services.

Sandy Martin: Following the murder in Ipswich two weeks ago of a 17-year-old and the critical stabbing of a 16-year-old on Wednesday evening, does the Minister recognise the serious effects that cuts to support for looked-after children and other vulnerable young people are having on their ability to lead safe, productive and law-abiding lives?

Rishi Sunak: I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with the families of the young children the hon. Gentleman mentions at this difficult time. Matters of policing and crime are for the Home Office, but the Government and local councils agree about the importance of high quality children's services. He will know that a new inspection framework was introduced earlier this year. I am pleased that Suffolk County Council, his local authority, was rated good in its most recent inspection.

Bambos Charalambous: Has the Minister spoken to his counterparts at the Department for Education to discuss ways to improve the educational attainment of looked-after and vulnerable children? If not, why not?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He will be pleased to know that just last week I met the Children's Minister to discuss exactly the topic that he raised. In particular, one of the topics that we discussed was the care leavers covenant, which the Government are piloting and introducing to improve the educational and employment outcomes for children and young people leaving care.

Property Rental Market

17. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to make the property rental market fairer and more affordable.

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): The Tenant Fees Bill will ban unnecessary fees and cap deposits, making rents fairer and easier for tenants.

Helen Whately: It is hard to call somewhere home if you might not be living there in three months' time, and for children, leaving home can also mean leaving school. Will my hon. Friend advise me what he is doing to increase the security of tenancies for people in rental accommodation?

Dominic Raab: I certainly recognise my hon. Friend's concerns. In fact, we will shortly be consulting on the barriers to longer-term tenancies to inform our work and assess what further ways landlords can be supported to offer more secure tenancies.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The legal framework and guidance governing the relationship between lodgers and landlords has not been updated since 2006, pre-dating the growth in online lettings platforms and the affordability crisis, which has led many more people to become both landlords and lodgers. In this relationship, both parties can find themselves vulnerable. The current framework of protection is not fit for purpose. Will the Government take action to bring the framework that governs the relationship between landlords and lodgers up to date?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We keep these matters and the regime under constant review. If she would like to write to me on the specific things that she takes issue with, we will of course look at them.

Marsha De Cordova (Batley and Spen) (Lab): If the Government are serious about tackling rogue landlords, will the Secretary of State today back Labour's plans to give local authorities the power to crack down on rogue landlords through private sector licensing, without authorities having to seek permission from central Government?

Dominic Raab: We are introducing the Tenant Fees Bill, which will not just make renting fairer but save tenants an estimated £240 million in its first year.
My concern with Labour’s proposals is that Shelter has said that they would hurt some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): There are 22,000 properties in Hull with a housing, health and social care rating hazard category of 1, the highest hazard rating that there is, and all these properties are in the private rented sector. The cost of repairing and removing these hazards is £23.5 million. Who does the Minister think should pay for that? Does he think it should be councils or private landlords? If he thinks that it should be private landlords, when will he start making it easier for councils to introduce private landlord licensing?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We absolutely think that the onus should be on the landlords. That is why we introduced civil penalties of up to £30,000 on rogue landlords and, in April, we are introducing banning orders and a database of rogue landlords and agents, so that we make sure that we protect tenants in the real world from that kind of abuse.

Mr Speaker: I call Toby Perkins—oh dear, where is the fella? The chap is not here, never mind.

Topical Questions

T1. [905902] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With Ramadan ending, I want to wish everyone Eid Mubarak. This week, we remember the Finsbury Park attack and, last week, we marked one year since the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The cladding thought to have been used on Grenfell Tower was unlawful under existing building regulations and should not have been used. To ensure that there is no doubt about which materials can be used on the external walls of high-rise residential buildings, today I am publishing a consultation on banning the use of combustible materials. Copies of the consultation are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

This Friday marks the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, and I hope colleagues from across the House will welcome the announcement of a national Windrush day to celebrate the contribution of the Windrush generation.

Luke Hall: South Gloucestershire Council is planning to build thousands of homes, which local families need, but a slow build-out rate from developers is putting the whole of the authority’s plans at risk because of a shortage of five-year land supply. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his strategy to ensure that permissions are built as quickly as possible?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on the need to ensure that permissions are built out quickly. We will be taking that into firm consideration as part of the update to the national planning policy framework, which will be published before the summer. I hope he will also be aware of the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is doing to see what the barriers are to prevent those build-outs from happening, and we will reflect on his ultimate recommendations.

T3. [905904] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What is the timescale for putting cash on the table for the Ayrshire growth deal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Prime Minister recently announced a growth deal for Ayrshire, and I am delighted to tell him that the negotiations, led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, are now under way, but it can only proceed as fast as the slowest actors, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will use his not inconceivable influence to pressurise the Scottish Government to play their part in the negotiations.

T2. [905903] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my hon. Friend advise me on when Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire will get their business rates retention?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): My hon. Friend has been a long-standing advocate for rural funding in his county, and I am pleased to tell him that we will continue to pilot reform of the business rates retention system in the forthcoming year. We will publish details of the new pilot very shortly and would very much welcome Staffordshire’s application to become a pilot.

T5. [905906] Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): My constituent Shirley Todd, a wheelchair user, carried out a survey of part of the city and discovered that 72% of businesses were inaccessible to wheelchair users. She has now launched a national campaign and petition. Will the Minister agree to consider plans to make local authorities responsible for proactively enforcing the provisions in the Equality Act 2010?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important topic. She will know that in the past I have spoken about greater provision of Changing Places in this House. Building regulations set the access requirements for new buildings, while the Equality Act requires providers for new buildings, while the Equality Act requires providers to make reasonable adjustments. If someone feels they have been discriminated against, there are several means for redress, and the Equality Advisory Support Service can provide help and support in that process.

T4. [905902] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Local councils in Northamptonshire today launched their official five-week consultation on how the eight councils in the county might best be merged into two by 2020. Will the Secretary of State join me in encouraging all local residents to take part so that their views can be heard loud and clear?

James Brokenshire: I certainly would encourage residents to take part in the consultation. My hon. Friend has rightly highlighted the challenge and need for the county to come together around this. We will obviously look to the consultation and the proposals as they are forthcoming to provide that long-term stability and solution.
T6. [905908] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Houses in multiple occupancy are an important part of a mixed housing economy, but when whole streets of former family properties become HMOs, it can put great pressure on local services and leave remaining residents feeling isolated. What action does the Secretary of State intend to take to genuinely empower local residents to have a meaningful influence on their communities where traditional planning requirements do not apply?

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his constituents have had an opportunity to make a submission on the revised national planning policy framework. We want to make sure that we give clear guidance, but ultimately it will be up to local authorities to get the balance right for the communities they serve.

T7. [905909] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Chelmsford is a rapidly growing city, with many new houses planned, but plans for a second railway station and bypass have been put off for too many years. Fortunately, we are through to the final round of bids for the housing infrastructure fund. Will the Minister update us on the timing and process for Chelmsford’s key bids?

Dominic Raab: Local authorities can submit their business cases from September and we expect to make the funding decisions later in the autumn. The £4 billion forward funding stream is an essential mechanism to unlock the delivery of 400,000 extra homes and make sure we carry communities with us.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I recently went out early one morning with the outreach workers of St Mungo’s, who help people newly sleeping rough to get into long-term support. Why is the Secretary of State pressing ahead with changes to funding for homeless hostels and other supported housing that charities such as St Mungo’s have said could threaten their hostels?

James Brokenshire: I, too, have visited St Mungo’s and seen the excellent work it does to provide first-night-out support to people on the streets. I will continue to work with it and other charities as we look towards our strategy for dealing with rough sleeping and at how that will need to reflect on all these important issues.

T8. [905910] Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be aware of my view—as he and I have discussed it—that most objections to large planning developments are based on the fact that the developments themselves add nothing to the local vernacular, do not acknowledge it and are often poorly built. That is partly owing to a lack of local planning officers and the fact that planning officers are poorly trained. Could the Government consider affiliating some of them to the Royal Institute of British Architects or the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and empowering them so that they can stand against the volume house builders?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend has made a powerful point about design. We have tried to bring people together on round tables to consider such issues, and to think about what the national planning policy framework can do to advance the agenda that he has highlighted.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Why is the Secretary of State pressing ahead with changes in funding for homelessness hostels and other supported housing which charities in my constituency, such as the YMCA, have said could threaten their vital services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): As the hon. Lady will know, the Government have been consulting on that very issue. We are absolutely committed to reducing homelessness, and we will be able to provide further information in due course.

T9. [905911] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the Minister provide an update on the Housing First pilots?

James Brokenshire rose—

Nigel Adams: No, it is me. Up and down—you have to be quick.

On 9 May the Secretary of State announced the allocation of funds for the £28 million Housing First pilots, which will be in Greater Manchester, the Liverpool city region and the west midlands. Plans to measure the impact and value for money of the approach are also well under way, and the first beneficiaries of the pilots will be housed in the autumn.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Government are currently consulting on sites for Traveller families. Rather than simply looking at more enforcement, which police chiefs and others say will not work, what positive solutions is the Minister considering, and will he meet the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma to discuss some of those positive alternatives?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I should certainly be very happy to receive any submissions from her. I think it is right that we increase the trend of making authorised sites available and, at the same time, ensure that, through both local authority and police powers, enforcement and the rule of law apply to all members of our communities.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The draft national planning policy framework largely closes the loophole of viability assessments, which developers often use to avoid the requirement for affordable housing. Would the Minister consider introducing stronger compulsory purchase order powers, so that local authorities can step in and purchase sites when developers continue to refuse to meet their obligations?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know how interested my hon. Friend is in this matter. CPO powers certainly have a role to play, although they must be exercised proportionately. The review conducted by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) will enable us to look at the issue in the round.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The discussions about any increase in funds for the NHS have been well publicised, but it is shocking that there is no extra money for social care. Was the Secretary of State aware that those discussions were taking place, and did he make any representations to increase funding for social care?

Rishi Sunak: As I have said, the Government are committed to providing a long-term, sustainable settlement for social care. That work has been ongoing for a while and is continuing. It includes the Secretary of State, along with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and there will be a report in due course.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Corby and East Northamptonshire is at the forefront when it comes to building new homes, but there are currently a number of planning applications in the system that are completely unwanted and on green open space, although we more than exceeded our housing targets. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in such instances, when local communities are doing all the right things, local developers should respect their wishes?

Dominic Raab: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his local authority. We want to see local authorities exercise their ambition, and we want to support them with the homes infrastructure funding that is available. Of course, once authorities have their local plans in place, they should have the protections to ensure that those plans are properly delivered and not abused.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the letter that he wrote to me on 7 June about New Ferry. When I meet him, as he has invited me to do, will that invitation extend not just to me and to the Mayor of Liverpool city region, Steve Rotheram, but to residents of New Ferry?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady and I have had an exchange of correspondence and I take the concerns that she has highlighted very seriously. I will certainly liaise with her office in finalising arrangements for that meeting and making it happen.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The music industry, clubgoers, musicians and the Musicians Union all welcome the inclusion of the Agent of Change principle in the Department’s proposed revision of planning regulation. When will the Minister actually introduce that much-welcomed and much-needed change?

Nigel Adams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the fabulous work he has done, alongside UK Music and others interested in this subject, to bring about this change in policy in what is a very important area. The Government will be responding very shortly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is really good to see the northern powerhouse Minister on the Treasury Bench because in recent weeks there was a view that he had gone out of service when we were facing the rail chaos around the new timetabling, so could he tell us exactly what he has been doing to improve connectivity between the east and west of the north?

Jake Berry: Apart from doing ITV, Granada, the BBC and local papers, including the Manchester Evening News, I do not know where the hon. Lady has been looking, but we continue to work with Transport for the North to improve transport connections across the north of England. This Government have been absolutely clear that the performance of Northern has been unacceptable, but I offer Labour Members the opportunity to condemn the RMT strike action, which is going to make a bad situation worse, or are they too heavily in hock to the unions to do what is right for the northern powerhouse?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Good public health is the best way of improving the wellbeing of the community, yet York City Council has slashed the public health budget by £1.3 million and we now have the highest level of in-service drug deaths in the country, so what is the Minister doing to protect public health, particularly given the removal of the public health grant?

Mr Speaker: These are all magnificent questions, but I hope the House will take it in the right spirit if I say that I do not think many hon. and right hon. Members have yet read the textbook on pithy questioning available on general release from the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). It would be a very useful Christmas present.

Rishi Sunak: The public health grant is not being ended; it is being folded into the business rates retention plan that the local government sector has welcomed and agreed for that process. Also, a new funding formula is being worked out with the Department of Health and Social Care specifically for public health, and I am sure we will welcome the hon. Lady’s contributions to that.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State yet personally had the chance to consider the important matter of Yorkshire devolution, and will he agree to meet the Yorkshire leaders from all parties before Yorkshire Day on 1 August—the Secretary of State personally?

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): We don’t want it.

Jake Berry: We are seeing peace and harmony across the House on Yorkshire.

I have been having discussions with the Secretary of State on Yorkshire devolution and with the recently elected Mayor of South Yorkshire. The Government have been absolutely clear that, before “One Yorkshire” can proceed, the South Yorkshire devolution deal must be fully implemented. It is up to the Labour party councils in South Yorkshire to get on with that. Nearly £1 billion in Government funding could flow to South Yorkshire. Why do they not seem to want it?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): While the Minister is on his feet, could he tell me when he expects a spade to be in the ground for the North Wales growth deal—any project, any spade, anywhere?

Jake Berry: As the right hon. Gentleman is aware—because he, like me, attended a meeting at the Wales Office just before Christmas—the North Wales growth
deal is proceeding well, but it can only go as fast as the slowest actors, so I say to him that he has power and influence over the North Wales local authorities. This Government have been clear: we would like to see concrete proposals come forward for the autumn Budget, but we cannot do this without the support of the North Wales authorities.

Mr Speaker: As I always like to welcome new young Members, I call, for the second time today, Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Secretary of State urgently give local authorities new powers and new resources to tackle the tide of plastic and other waste that is engulfing our towns, cities and countryside?

James Brokenshire: I think the hon. Gentleman will, with all his years in this House, recognise the importance of this issue and that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been taking important steps as well. Of course local government have a responsibility too, and I hope he will welcome the settlement that has seen more resources going to local government under this Government.
New Member

The following Member made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:
Janet Daby, for Lewisham East.

Medicinal Cannabis

3.35 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on the granting of an emergency licence to allow the return of medical cannabis for Billy Caldwell.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Over the weekend, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary issued an emergency licence to allow Billy Caldwell’s medical team to access cannabis-based medicine. This was an emergency procedure, led by a senior clinician with the support of the medical director at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in expressing genuine concern for Billy’s health, and that they will be pleased with the news that he has been discharged from hospital today.

The course of action in this case was unprecedented. I should explain that our guiding principle is that any process in this context must be clinically led and evidence based. To date, Home Office policy has been to permit the production, supply and possession of raw cannabis solely for research purposes under a Home Office licence. The cannabis-based medicine Sativex is currently the only one that can be prescribed in the UK, because there is a proven case for its safety and efficacy. However, this case and that of Alfie Dingley and others have shone a light on the use of cannabis-based medicine in this country and highlighted the need for the Government to explore the issue, and our handling of these issues, further.

I recognise the need to ensure that the approach to licensing works more effectively. As a first step, I can announce today that the Government are establishing an expert panel of clinicians to advise Ministers on any individual applications to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. This is consistent with the principle that a clinician must be at the heart of the process. I have asked Dame Sally Davies to take forward this important work. Let me be clear that both the Home Secretary and I, as fathers, been profoundly moved by Billy’s story and others like it, along with the rest of the House and the rest of the country. I want to reassure the families and the public that the Home Secretary and I are working together to do all we can to take forward the necessary steps at pace, and that more announcements will be forthcoming.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I would like to thank the Minister for coming to the House today to discuss this urgent question. The Home Secretary has now conceded that cannabis has medicinal benefits by granting the emergency licence for Billy Caldwell on expert advice. When can we expect to see more import licences to make medicinal cannabis available to all who would benefit from it? Moreover, will the Government support the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on the legalisation of cannabis for medicinal purposes, when it returns on 6 July?

On 20 February, an urgent question was raised by the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) about Alfie Dingley’s case. Billy Caldwell is now in exactly the same situation. At that time, the Minister told the House that he would undertake “to explore every option within the current regulatory framework.”—[Official Report, 20 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 25.]
Now, 119 days later, the Government have still not granted Alfie Dingley his medicine. That medicine is available in 37 other countries. The Prime Minister met Alfie in Downing Street on 20 March and he was told that the Government would do all they could to help him. Billy Caldwell was hospitalised last week after his prescribed medical cannabis was taken away by customs officers, so it is excellent news that he left hospital today, but hon. Members will have been alarmed to hear the Health Secretary say this morning that it will be months before a system is in place to get medicinal cannabis to such children, and other patients who require it. Will the Minister give an assurance that Alfie Dingley will have had his medicine by the time he comes to Parliament with his mother on Wednesday?

Moreover, I also have two children in my constituency—the only two in Wales and two of just 15 in the United Kingdom—who have the rare genetic disorder NKH, which is a serious, life limiting condition. Charlie Jones, who is six, and Jace Newton-Sealey, who is just one, both suffer from frequent debilitating cluster seizures. According to their consultant neurologist, to whom I spoke earlier, both would benefit hugely from using medical cannabis. Charlie’s grandad, Ian Gilmore, has been in contact with the Home Office since 2014, when he learned of the benefits of cannabis for Charlie, but he has been given conflicting advice, pushed from pillar to post and fobbed off.

Will the Minister say when his Department will get a grip on the situation? Why the delay until now? Why is an announcement not being made today that this medicine will be available now to all who need it? Many patients—this is what I have a problem with—are illegally accessing cannabis, which opens them up to using the wrong form of the drug. The Government have a duty to protect patients and sufferers, so when will the Minister act? Why—

Mr Speaker: Order. I granted this question because it is urgent, but the hon. Lady has already exceeded her time by 50%. I assume that she is drawing towards a conclusion.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I will conclude right now. Why are the Government stuck in the dark ages? What will the Home Secretary do to speed up the process? In response to, “When?” the answers, “Next week,” “Next month,” or “In due course,” are simply not good enough.

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Lady for that long list of questions, and I will do my best to answer them. She asked about the recognition of the medical benefits of some cannabis-based medicine but, as I said in my response, they are already recognised by the fact that, for example, Sativex can be prescribed in the UK. Its safety and efficacy have been proven, and it has been rigorously tested. She will know the responsibility of the Government and everyone involved in the process to ensure that medicines are safe, but the system allows for medicines to be licensed once they are established and tested.

The hon. Lady mentioned the case of Alfie Dingley, with which I am familiar, and I made it clear that, however we may feel about the current rules, I undertook to try to find a solution for Alfie within the existing rules. Again, it is an unprecedented situation, because this is the first time that we are considering a personal licence, so this is new ground for everyone. I can confirm to her, as I confirmed to the family, that the process of applying for a licence to find a long-term sustainable legal solution for Alfie is well under way. It is clinically led, and I have given assurances that we will drive the process as hard as possible. Indeed, a date has been set for a compliance visit, which is a necessary part of the process. We are pushing things as hard as possible, and I want to place on the record my thanks, appreciation and respect for the dignity and patience of Alfie’s family in this difficult situation.

The hon. Lady challenges the Government to change fast, and I think I have made it clear that, as the Prime Minister said this morning, we have to look hard at our processes for handling such situations. We must ensure, as the Health Secretary made clear today, that our policy is fully up to date with the best possible understanding of the most recent and relevant evidence. As I am sure the hon. Lady will appreciate, the Government have to take a bit of time to think things through. We have to get the detail right. We do not have the luxury of opposition; we have to work through the detail to get this right. My statement recognises not only that we are taking immediate steps to improve our processes so that they become more clinically led, with the introduction of a new clinically-led panel of experts to advise Ministers, but that we are taking a wider look at policy processes and will be making a forthcoming announcement.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I am by no means a supporter of recreational cannabis use. However, a woman I know, Amelia Powers, was given two weeks to live with a diagnosis of a tumour of the brain. There was nothing more they could do, and she took to using a form of this and, for the last seven or eight years, has not just reduced the tumour but has got rid of it. She now runs her own company, which she started.

Mr Hurd: I suspect that every Member has personal knowledge, directly or indirectly, of people who swear by the benefits of cannabis-based medicine that has helped them in very difficult circumstances. I completely understand that.

My right hon. Friend talked about building a coalition across Government on updating the evidence, and I signalled in my statement that that is exactly what is happening. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), is sitting alongside me, and I refer my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) to this morning’s comments by the Secretary of State for Health and
Social Care, which make it clear that the Government are seriously looking again at our processes and how we handle these cases.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that the public are increasingly dismayed by the Government’s handling of the question of cannabis oil for medical use? I remind him that the concentration of the relevant compounds in cannabis oil is so small that nobody could possibly get any recreational use from it.

I accept that the Home Secretary moved swiftly to allow a short-term supply for Billy Caldwell but, overall, the Government’s management of the current system of issuing licences for cannabis oil has been lamentable. It has left people in pain and suffering, and it has left families anxious and distraught. It seems to Opposition Members that the current system, even with the expert panel to which he refers, is simply not fit for purpose.

That is why a Labour Government, mindful that this oil is legal in many other jurisdictions, will move towards a legal framework that allows the prescription of cannabis oil for medical use. We believe that such a move, taken with all due care, tests and so forth, would have support on both sides of the House and would be welcomed by the British public, who are weary of the chaos, confusion and personal tragedies caused by the Government’s current management of the system.

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Lady for recognising the speed of movement by the Home Office this week in response to an emergency request from clinical leads at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. The Home Secretary overruled nothing in this process. We worked together very closely this week and responded, as I said, very decisively to an emergency request for a limited licence in a direct call from the senior clinician and the medical director at the Chelsea and Westminster.

I understand the right hon. Lady’s point about public sentiment on this. People are unsettled by what they have seen, and we totally understand that. What I regret is that she is trying to make a party political point. Of course, she was in power and Labour was in power for a long time, and they did the square root of very little in this context. The system we are now trying to work with is basically the rules we inherited from the last Labour Government.

I do not think anyone in politics is in a position to take a high moral stand on this issue. We need to give an undertaking that the policies and processes will be informed by the most up-to-date evidence, and we challenge ourselves harder to make sure these processes are more clinically led than they have been in the past.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I refer Members to my declaration of interest, as a consultant paediatrician. Some compounds within cannabis have anticonvulsive properties. Cannabidiol has been shown in animal studies to have an active anticonvulsant compound, but THC, the one that is illegal in certain concentrations, has been found to have both anticonvulsant and proconvulsant properties in animal studies, and there are concerns that it may also be responsible for causing significant psychological problems, such as psychosis, if used over a longer period. Epidiolex is a pharmaceutical grade, quality-assured product that contains cannabidiol but less than 0.1% THC, and it is both legal and used in clinical trials in this country, including with children. The oils available on the internet or at health food shops are not subject to that sort of scrutiny, do not have the same level of quality assurance and have variable levels of concentrations.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a huge difference between these two products—the quality-assured one and the not quality-assured one—and that we need to investigate the best possible scientific evidence on the usage and benefits of cannabis-based medicines, so that they can be used safely and properly to the best effect for our patients?

Mr Hurd: I defer to my hon. Friend’s medical knowledge, and her intervention just reinforces the point I am trying to make about the need for this process to be clinically led, as far as is possible. She is making the point about there being certain cannabis medicines and certain conditions, and the evidence is at best mixed on this. She makes the fundamental point about our responsibility, as regulators, being to make sure that people are accessing and using products that are tried and tested, and as safe as possible. Let us imagine the consequences of prescribing an unregulated medicine that goes wrong—I imagine the scene in this House at that point. In our, understandably, emotional response to recent events, we must also make sure that we do policy right and get it right. That is why we require a little more time to come back to this House with more detailed plans.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party is in favour of the decriminalisation of cannabis for medicinal use, given the evidence of the benefits it has in alleviating some serious conditions, such as that suffered by young Billy Caldwell and young Alfie Dingley. We would like the Government to look seriously at the evidence for decriminalising the use of cannabis for medicinal use. If they are not prepared to do that, we would like them to devolve the power to Scotland to do it, so that the Scottish Government could take steps. However, I stress that we would like to see this done for everybody in the UK. I therefore have two questions for the Minister. First, when can we expect the Government to look seriously at the evidence and to bring forward these matters for proper debate in this House? Secondly, if that is not going to happen, when will he allow the Scottish Government to take the appropriate steps for people in Scotland?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that question; she is right to insist on the importance of an evidence-based approach. Of course, the Home Office regularly keeps the evidence under review. As I have said at this Dispatch Box before, one key milestone in this process is to review what the World Health Organisation feels about this issue, because it is conducting a major review of it. We are actively considering whether there is an argument for taking a more urgent step in terms of reviewing the evidence, the processes and the way we handle these cases, and I will keep the House informed on that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is nothing new, and no inherent contradiction, in having available for medicinal
use addictive drugs that one would not allow for recreational use? May I illustrate that by describing my personal experience of 32 years ago? When recovering from severe back surgery, I was given a rather pleasant drug and I asked for a repeat prescription, only to be told that as morphia is related to heroin, there were limits on how much they were giving to me. So why can common sense not prevail in the case of marijuana, as occurred in that case?

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend for sharing his personal experience and bringing back what were clearly some happy memories for him. I understand the point he makes and come back to what I was saying: we are absolutely serious about reviewing urgently our processes and policy in this area, to make sure that we are as consistent and up-to-date as possible. I have signalled today that we recognise, as did the Prime Minister this morning, that we need to make some changes to the way we handle these cases, which is why I have introduced the first step that we have taken today.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Is it not utterly shameful that in this country we continue to criminalise people who use cannabis in various forms for medicinal purposes, including the relief of pain, thereby pushing people into the hands of criminals who have no interest at all in their welfare? And what on earth is a Home Office Minister doing responding to an urgent question on a health issue? Surely it should be the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman and I go back a long way and I have a great deal of respect for his position and experience. I simply make two points. First, the rules are as they are and, as a former Minister, the right hon. Gentleman knows that Ministers are bound by the rules. We can debate and challenge in this place—as we are beginning to do—whether the rules are fit for purpose, and that is the right thing to do in a representative Parliament. Secondly, in respect of my role, I have today signalled clearly that we are looking again at our processes and how these cases are handled. I have signalled clearly that we believe strongly that the handling of such cases needs to be more clinically led, hence the appointment of a panel. As to which Ministers decide and where the decision sits inside the system, that will be part of our consideration of how we handle these cases more effectively than we have done in the past.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that, with the Government having taken this important initiative, other similar cases will now be treated with similar leniency and that we will not have to wait for the wheels of Government to grind along slowly?

Mr Hurd: I do not think that the wheels of Government moved slowly this week at all—far from it. In response to an emergency request, we issued an emergency and limited licence very quickly, in recognition of the very difficult situation that we were in. I assure my hon. Friend that we will always seek to treat cases as consistently as possible, and that goes for Alfie Dingley and Sophia Gibson and the others. It is important that we are consistent, but in this case we were dealing with an emergency request for an emergency licence.

Frank Field ( Birkenhead) (Lab): Alfie met the Prime Minister eight weeks ago and she instructed the Home Office to act; on Saturday, he had 30 seizures. Will the Home Office give the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)—who is seeking to catch your eye, Mr Speaker—Lady Meacher and me the authority to go through border control with the drugs that Alfie needs? If the Minister will not act, may we?

Mr Hurd: I do not think that that will be necessary. With respect to the right hon. Gentleman, he is a lawmaker and should not be a lawbreaker. On the Alfie Dingley case, we have made it quite clear that we will do everything that we can, within the existing law, to find a solution. We have had a bit of a stop-start process because this is new ground and it is very complicated. It has to be clinically led. The right hon. Gentleman possibly does not know the underlying details, but I assure him that I am assured that the process is now firmly on track. I hope that we will be in a position to make a positive decision as soon as possible.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): My constituent’s two-and-a-half-year-old son was having 300 seizures a day. He described each one as resetting his son’s brain like a computer hard drive being wiped. Following the use of CBD, the seizures have been reduced to between 30 and 50 a day. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case, and will he perhaps meet my constituent, because he has an outstanding application for a medical licence for his son?

Mr Hurd: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. I will of course offer to meet her constituent, as I have met every single family who have come forward, because we are absolutely serious about trying to help, as far as we can, because these cases are deeply difficult. I come back, though, to the point that I am sure my hon. Friend will absolutely respect, which is that it should not really be down to politicians to make these decisions; it has to be a clinically led process. When the clinicians came forward this week on Billy’s behalf, we were able to respond to the request for emergency help, but it has to be a clinically led process.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The fact is that, had Billy Caldwell’s family not taken this to the limits at the weekend, the Government would still be sitting on their hands. The good news is that, for the first time, the Government have acknowledged the therapeutic value of medicinal cannabis. I ask the Government to expand this to people suffering from multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s and certain cancers. It is happening in 30 American states, and 12-plus countries in Europe are already doing this. I ask this Government to legislate to bring forward medicinal cannabis under prescription in the United Kingdom.

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman is expressing the view, which is held in many places across the House, that legislation needs to be revisited and that this is the right place in which to debate that. I refute what he was saying about the Government sitting on their hands in
Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and his extremely constructive approach to a very difficult situation. He will get a reply to his helpful letter. I fully undertake to engage with him and with anyone who has strong views, opinions, and particularly expertise in this area. As I have said, we must make sure that policy and process are up to date and informed by the best and most up-to-date evidence, and that is what we undertake to do.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has referred to the role played by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and he announced an expert body to look at the matter. Will he tell us what the advisory council is currently saying to the Government about this issue?

Mr Hurd: The advisory council’s advice on the lack of evidence around the medicinal benefits of cannabis and cannabis-based medicines has not changed, but the process needs to be reviewed constantly in the light of the evidence, and that is what we do. I should clarify that the clinical panel that I have announced today will advise Ministers on specific claims and applications that come to us.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Minister knows that I was at No. 10 with him and the Prime Minister, Alfie and his family. I cannot see why there should be a difference between the wonderful news that Billy has been given his drugs on clinical advice, and the advice in the cases of Alfie and others. The reason for the difference is that these medications come under schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. That is why the issue is being dealt with by the Home Office, but it should not be in the Home Office; it should be in the Department of Health and Social Care. I am sure that Alfie will get his drugs very soon, but it is not soon enough for many others.

Mr Hurd: I understand my right hon. Friend’s point. He has been a tireless and persistent campaigner for Alfie and others in this situation. I share his hope that we can process Alfie’s application as quickly as possible; it is now on a much better track. This is complicated and it is new ground for everyone, not least the clinical and medical community, but we are finding our way towards a legal, sustainable, long-term solution, as well as revisiting and relooking at their policy.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Is it not the case that it is becoming policy by public outcry? It should not take such desperate cases for the Government to revisit and relook at their policy. A constituent of mine has relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, and suffers serious pain every day. Her specialist thinks that medicinal cannabis is the way forward for her pain relief. Will the Minister look at her case if I write to him, and will he look seriously at expediting provisions as quickly as possible for all our constituents?

Mr Hurd: I hope that I can do better than that by inviting the clinical panel, once it is set up, to look at the case raised by the hon. Lady. The point is that, within the rules at the moment—as we are trying to demonstrate through the Alfie Dingley application—we are prepared...
to look at individual licences in exceptional cases. Will it be as quick as I, or anyone, would like? No, but this is new and difficult. We need to get it absolutely right, not least to ensure that these licences stand up to scrutiny and legal challenge. I hope that we are going to get there very soon. I have given the family my absolute assurance that we are going to drive this process as hard as possible, as we will with other applications in the new system that we are setting up.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): As the former Minister for medicines regulation, may I welcome the intervention of the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister this week? When I tried to look at this issue as a Minister, the message that I got was that it was the Home Office that was so tough on cannabis law that it would not countenance changes. I welcome the fact that Ministers are looking at this issue and, more importantly, the Prime Minister’s announcement today that she is supporting a review. I urge the Minister not to overcomplicate this. Patients around the country are suffering from acute conditions. It should not be beyond the wit of Ministers to put together a simple licensing and registration scheme so that those people are able to possess appropriate cannabis oil in a way that does not open up the market for recreational use.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and recognise his passion and leadership on the subject. I come back to this point: it is all very well for politicians to express their passionately held views on this subject but, at the end of the day, the people we have to hear from are the clinicians.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I welcome this first step from the Government, but the Minister has just said that the Government recognise the medical benefits of cannabis, so the question is: why on earth is cannabis still a controlled drug under schedule 1, which is for drugs with no medical benefit? It is time for an urgent rescheduling of cannabis, which would make life easier for the Government and for patients.

Mr Hurd: As I was at pains to point out in my opening remarks, cannabis-based Sativex is prescribed in the UK because there is a proven case for its safety and efficacy. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me, will not want to have the market full of unregulated or untested products if we do not know their long-term impact. We have to proceed with some sense of responsibility and get the detail right. We have shown at the Home Office that we are prepared to be flexible on these issues out of compassion for exceptional cases.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When will the commission start work, how will it operate, and how will it speed up the process of delivering these drugs?

Mr Hurd: We have only announced it today. I have only just asked Dame Sally Davies to take forward this important work. There is a lot of detail to be filled in, in consultation with her and others. We will return to the House to fill in some of the detail that my hon. Friend asks for.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his help so far. I thank him, in particular, for the meeting that we had with my constituent Danielle Gibson about her daughter, Sophia. The Minister will know, and the House needs to know, that Darren and Danielle Gibson took their daughter Sophia to Holland to receive cannabis oil, under prescription and controlled. During the three weeks they were there, she had only one seizure instead of the dozens that she has every day. In the past 48 hours, she has not eaten or slept. At this moment in time, there is six months of cannabis oil available for her, paid for, sitting in Holland for her to collect. What will I tell my constituents? How long will the process take?

Mr Hurd: As the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed before, and in the presence of Danielle, there is a mechanism—a process—that can lead to a legal, sustainable solution to this through a licensing process that needs to be clinically led. In this case, it is devolved to the Northern Ireland Administration, as he well knows. There is a process. We are feeling our way. We all want to drive this fast, but it does need to be done properly. In the situation that we had this week with Billy, we were responding to an emergency situation where clinical leads inside an institution came to us and said, “We need this on an emergency, limited-duration basis.” The long-term solution for Billy now has to be clinically led, but we were responding to an emergency situation.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I am sure that many will agree that the great British public are very much behind the emergency decision taken by the Minister to secure the cannabis oil for Billy Caldwell. Will the Minister now look at whether other children like Billy should, with clinical support, be allowed to legally access cannabis oil?

Mr Hurd: As I have said in my previous answers, there is an active discussion about a review of how we handle these types of situations. Again, the core principle, as it was this week in the case of Billy Caldwell, is that this must be clinically led.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the UK is behind the curve on public opinion on the matter of medicinal cannabis? How does he explain the fact that Ireland introduced a purpose-designed special licence for little Ava Barry back in December 2017, yet the UK Government appear to be dragging their heels?

Mr Hurd: I do not necessarily agree that we are behind the curve on public opinion. We moved very fast this week under extremely difficult circumstances. I wholly agreed with the Health Secretary this morning that we need to make sure that our policy is up to date in terms of the medical evidence and the best interests of patients. That is why, as I said, there is an active discussion within Parliament about changes in process and policy. The first announcement in that process was made today. I am sure that as those discussions are finalised, there will be more announcements to follow.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This is a personal licence that has been issued. What liability, if any, is there for a clinician who believes that this is the right treatment to be provided, given that this drug has not been authorised in the UK?
Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As part of the licensing process for the exceptional, limited-duration licence for Billy, the paediatric consultant at the hospital specifically stated that decision making about Billy’s long-term care with regard to medication and supervision of his treatment should be undertaken by the paediatric neurologist. We agree with that.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It seems to some of us that the biggest problem with the legalisation of this drug is the fact that it is called “cannabis”. Some of us share the Government’s view that cannabis should not be legalised for recreational use, but this is a totally different situation. While there is delay, children and adults are in serious suffering and, in some cases, may die. Given that organisations such as the MS Society are fully in favour of this legalisation, how long will it take the Government to act?

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, but I want to reassure her that the Government are very clear that this is a discussion about access to cannabis-based medicine and nothing else.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): There is clearly a consensus in the House for a review of policy in this area, but neither this House nor public opinion is expert, so can the Minister assure me that we will always proceed on the basis of clinical evidence? Will he look particularly closely at the good, the bad and the ugly examples from North America, where medicinal cannabis has been legalised?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I come back to the point that we have to proceed on the basis of good evidence and the most up-to-date information. Some of the evidence in this area is mixed, and therefore we need to be very careful about how we proceed. That sounds bureaucratic and a bit plodding, and I apologise to anyone who feels that way, but it is the responsibility of Government to think things through and get things right, and we will proceed on the basis of evidence and introduce more clinical leadership to this process.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The many constituents who have contacted me who have MS, seizures and chronic pain will no doubt welcome the moves that the Government have made, albeit not as fast as they would like. Can the Minister confirm whether this is a change in approach from the Government, to stop treating drugs as a criminal issue and start treating them as a medical issue? He mentioned that he is taking advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The ACMD also supports supervised drug consumption rooms, which help to make this a medical, not a criminal, issue. Is he willing to meet me to discuss that?

Mr Hurd: I am happy to meet all Members with an interest in this subject. I should say that the Government have not formally changed their position on medicinal cannabis. We have responded to an exceptional case and issued a licence to ensure that emergency treatment can be accessed, but I have signalled that we are looking again at the way in which we handle these cases.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I support the legalisation of cannabis for medical use and understand the need for a clinical lead on this issue, but given that a large number of countries have already legalised this drug, there must be a mountain of internationally accredited research already being undertaken that clinicians in the United Kingdom could access.

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I thank him for the emphasis he places on the need to move ahead on an evidenced, clinically-led basis. He talks about international evidence, and he is absolutely right. That is why we are taking great interest in the WHO’s updating of its research, evidence and guidance on this extremely important, complicated and difficult subject.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given that the Minister has said that clinicians must take the lead on this, when will he reschedule cannabis to allow clinicians to use their professional judgment in the provision of medicinal cannabis to children such as my constituent Murray Gray, who suffers from a very similar condition to Alfie Dingley? Will he meet me to discuss that?

Mr Hurd: I have met all the families I know about who are going through these incredibly difficult situations. Everyone understands that parents would do absolutely anything for their children in these circumstances, and I have huge respect for that, so of course I will meet the hon. Lady. The straight answer to her question is that we have demonstrated today—it is not yet completed with Alfie Dingley—that we are prepared to look at licences in a new way, but it needs to be clinically led, and that is the fundamental point.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): An advisory vote in the Senedd in support of legalising cannabis for medicinal purposes was hailed as a victory for common sense and compassion by Arfon Jones, the police and crime commissioner for north Wales. Only two AMs voted against it. Considering the political support in Wales and the fact that health is a devolved issue, why will the British Government not allow the National Assembly to make decisions on this issue on behalf of Welsh patients?

Mr Hurd: It is not a devolved matter at the moment. I am more than happy to have those conversations, but we deal with the system as it is.

Sir Mike Penning: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order do not really come now—

Sir Mike Penning: Well, you can try!

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman can try and—I will even be helpful to him, because my generous spirit is getting the better of me—if his point of order relates to the matter with which we have just been dealing, I feel that we can on this occasion indulge him.

Sir Mike Penning: If you do not try, you never know, do you?

During the urgent question, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) asked whether it would be okay if Members went abroad and brought back such a prescribed product, and the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service quite rightly said that we are lawmakers
not lawbreakers. However, we are also here to protect our population and our constituents. I say this with an open heart and a genuine understanding of what the Minister is going through, because I tried to deal with this when I was in his position, but if Alfie Dingley does not get his drugs by Wednesday, a delegation from this House will go abroad to get them for him.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful—or at least I think I am very grateful—to the right hon. Gentleman. Manifestly, that was not even an imitation of or an approximation to a point of order. Nevertheless, I am sure it was extremely important. He has unburdened himself of his opinions, and they are on the record for the people of Hemel Hempstead, the nation and possibly even the world to study.

Before we proceed to the second urgent question, I will take this opportunity to inform the House that Gina Martin, who was herself a victim of the loathsome practice of upskirting and has subsequently led the campaign to outlaw the practice, has joined us in the Gallery today. Gina, we welcome you here and we thank you for coming.

4.21 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the Government plan to legislate on making upskirting a specific sexual offence.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am very pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the urgent question asked by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) because she and Gina Martin have campaigned tirelessly for the or vaginal practice to become a criminal offence. I am delighted to have met both of them on a number of occasions to discuss how we can progress this important legislation, and to have worked with them to support the hon. Lady’s private Member’s Bill—the Voutrism (Offences) Bill. I welcome Gina Martin to the House today. We will continue to build on their efforts to ensure that this activity becomes a criminal offence because upskirting is an invasion of privacy, and a humiliating and distressing experience. The Lord Chancellor and I were disappointed when the private Member’s Bill did not make progress on Friday.

Although there are existing offences that can be used to punish upskirting in some circumstances, there is a gap in the law. The offences of outraging public decency or voyeurism may be used to capture upskirting. However, the public order offence is limited, as the offence needs to take place in a public place and two people need to be present. Conversely, the voyeurism offence needs to be a private act and must take place in a place where one would expect privacy. There may be activities, such as photographs taken in schools, that are not caught by either provision. This law will close that loophole, and ensure there is no doubt that this activity is criminal and will not be tolerated. For the most serious sexual offences, we will ensure that the offender is also placed on the sex offenders register.

Upskirting is an invasion of privacy that leaves victims feeling humiliated, so we will bring legislation before the House in Government time to ensure that this practice becomes an offence. We will introduce the Bill in the House of Commons on Thursday, with a Second Reading before the recess. The leadership of the hon. Member for Bath and the outstanding campaign of Gina Martin have shown how it is possible for individuals to make a difference. I am looking forward to working with colleagues from across the House to progress this matter and make upskirting an offence.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for her response and for the fantastic teamwork on this issue so far. Does she share my appreciation of the Prime Minister saying on “The Andrew Marr Show” yesterday that the practice of upskirting is “invasive”, “degrading” and “offensive”, and that she will take the Bill that was blocked and put it through in Government time? Will the Minister join me in congratulating Gina Martin and her lawyer, Ryan Whelan, on their fantastic work in bringing the issue to the point we have reached today?

My Bill remains on the books and will be reached again on Friday 6 July. Will the Minister provide me with a full timetable of the Government’s planned
programme for their proposed Bill? The Bill must, of course, travel through the Commons and the Lords to become law. If the Government do not introduce the legislation until the end of July, the changes will not be in place soon enough for the summer and further potential victims will be left vulnerable to this vile practice.

It is a shame that we have to be here today because of the objection of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) to the Bill on Friday. The private Member’s Bill system must be modernised, but that is a matter for a different day. The Government must bring about this important change to the law, but that is a matter for a different day. The Government must bring about this important change to the law, making upskirting a specific offence as soon as possible. Will they ensure that the Bill has the full support of all their Members?

Lucy Frazer: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and I agree with the Prime Minister that upskirting should be an offence and should be prosecuted; having spoken to Gina, I understand the humiliation it causes. Our priority is that it should become an offence as soon as possible. We will introduce the Bill on Thursday. I understand that it has considerable support across the House, and I welcome that cross-party support.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I very much welcome my hon. and learned Friend the Minister’s announcement today; she is to be commended for the rapid and collegiate way in which she has dealt with this issue. I encourage her to look more widely at some of the other offences that particularly affect women, such as the posting of explicit images online, commonly known as revenge pornography. Many of us have campaigned for a long time for such activities also to be recognised as sexual offences and be dealt with accordingly.

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend makes some important points and I know that the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, does an immense amount of work ensuring that women can take their place in society and are protected. A number of issues could be raised. There is clearly a gap in the law when it comes to one of them, but it can be put on the statute book quickly and easily. We are ensuring that that is done as soon as possible.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the campaigners, especially Gina Martin, who has shone a spotlight on this important issue, as has the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). I welcome the Government’s decision finally to bring forward the legislation, but I must put it on the record that the delays in getting to this point were totally unnecessary and have caused needless suffering. The Government should not have waited to act until almost a year after Labour’s shadow Justice Secretary first wrote demanding this new legislation. They should not have been relying on a private Member’s Bill that was likely to be scuppered by the disgusting behaviour of their own MPs. But better late than never.

Although we welcome the Government’s decision to introduce this legislation, I would like the Minister to clarify a number of issues. Given the broad parliamentary consensus on this matter, can it not be addressed within a day or a week—before the summer, at least? That is when women will most go to festivals, where this disgraceful practice is far too common. What will the Minister do to ensure that her own MPs vote in favour, given the disgraceful opposition from the Tory Back Benches last Friday?

Will the law cover the act of distribution as well as the taking of the image? Will the legislation guarantee that the victims of upskirting will be granted automatic anonymity in any criminal cases? Finally, given that we must do all we can to prevent the suffering and harassment of women online, will the Government now reconsider last week’s disappointing decision to refuse to extend anonymity to the victims of so-called revenge porn?

Lucy Frazer: The Government have a priority: to ensure that this legislation gets on to the statute book as soon as possible. On the Government side of the House, we are not bothered about the vehicle for that; the public are not concerned about that. The priority is to ensure that the legislation goes on to the statute book. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) recognised, the Government have made a commitment to introducing a Bill as swiftly as possible and we will be doing so on Thursday.

The Government have taken a number of measures to ensure that women are protected. On domestic violence, we have ensured that coercive control is recognised as a matter of domestic violence and we have increased the penalties for stalking. Members on the Government Benches do want to protect women.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I assure the Minister that from the multiple conversations I have had, every single Back Bencher on the Government Benches, bar an unfortunate very small minority, support the Government bringing this forward as a criminal offence. We welcome it almost unanimously. Does she believe that making this a criminal offence is an extremely welcome step forward in tackling some of the sexist attitudes remaining in our society that underpin violence against women and girls?

Lucy Frazer: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have not heard one Government Member say that they think that as a matter of principle this measure should not become law. I agree that this very important proposed legislation needs to be put through Parliament.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party deprecates what happened on Friday in this House. It illustrates how the archaic rules of the House can sometimes be used to prevent the proper debate of important private Members’ Bills. Something needs to be done about it.

I welcome today’s announcement, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and Gina Martin on their campaigning on this issue. Upskirting is already a criminal offence in Scotland and has been since 2010. Will the Minister, in framing the new law for England and Wales, look at sections 9(4)(a) and 9(4)(b) of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, which in 2010 were brought in to make upskirting an offence in Scotland; and will she consult the expertise of my former colleagues in the sexual offences special prosecution unit at the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland, given that they have some seven or eight years’ experience of prosecuting this crime?
Lucy Frazer: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her comments. We have looked very closely at the Scottish legislation. There is a slight difference between the legislation in Scotland and in England. There is no public order offence in Scotland, so there was a bigger gap in Scotland than there was here. We have, however, looked very closely at that legislation. Our proposed legislation is not identical, but it is modelled very closely on the Scottish legislation.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I am delighted to welcome Gina and Ryan as guests today in the Gallery. Does the Minister agree that the upskirting campaign led by the extraordinary Gina Martin, supported by her lawyer and fellow Aberdonian Ryan Whelan, is worthy of the praise of this House? We owe Gina so much for her courage in raising this issue and fighting for change. That should be put on the record, because we need to make sure that this practice is truly and well outlawed.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Gina Martin and her lawyer Ryan are both in the House today. They should be commended for the work they have done to ensure that this becomes law. They have done an immense job in highlighting the issue and ensuring the legislation is put on the statute book.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has succeeded in uniting the nation where the Procedure Committee has failed for two years: namely, on the need to update the private Members’ Bill process. Has the Minister spoken to the Leader of the House about this?

Lucy Frazer: There was an issue in relation to Friday, but I would like to remind hon. Members across the House of the important role private Members’ Bills play in our parliamentary system. A number of private Members’ Bills have passed or are passing through the House at the moment that will improve the lives of the public considerably: the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Use of Photography) Bill from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill from the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed). Such Bills play an important role and we should recognise that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much support the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill—commonly known as the upskirting Bill—introduced by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), not least because I have been helping a very brave woman called Emily Hunt to get justice. Emily was the victim of a very serious voyeurism abuse, and I have already been in discussions with the Solicitor General about how we can ensure that the upskirting Bill helps Emily, too. If the Government are bringing forward a Bill, will the Minister look at Emily’s case to make sure that the legislation also covers the serious voyeurism abuse that she suffered?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am aware of the issue in relation to Emily Hunt’s case. I have discussed that matter with the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, who responded recently to an Adjournment debate on this secured by an Opposition Member. The issue is an important one. What this Bill does is tackle a specific issue, which we should get on to the statute book as soon as possible.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Has the Minister given some thought to how this potential Bill and then Act will be enforced? With the newspapers saying that only 5% of burglaries and robberies are being tackled by police, how does one expect that the law on these sorts of acts will be enforced by the police, who are so stretched? Will she have a resource implication chapter in her Bill?

Lucy Frazer: It is comforting to know, as I mentioned, that there are already offences on the statute book whereby it is possible sometimes for this offence to be caught. Indeed, there have been prosecutions in recent years under the public order offences legislation; people have been prosecuted for this type of activity.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I attended several constituency events on Saturday and a number of people came up to me and expressed their utter concern and disappointment at what happened to the Bill of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on Friday. I welcome what my hon. and learned Friend has said at the Dispatch Box today about bringing the legislation forward quickly. The need for the legislation is a product of what has happened with technology in recent years. Will she continue to look at what is going on with technology to make sure that we keep ahead of these types of offences in future?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend raises an important point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) did. We are looking at a very broad area in relation to sexual offences, technology, the internet and the use of photography. These are all important issues that we are currently looking at, but this is a specific offence that we would like to get on the statute book as soon as possible.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her direct engagement with me on this issue and commend her for the very swift action. This is a devolved issue, but it is one that should unite all parties in Northern Ireland. Will she commit to meeting me, so that the work being undertaken can be shared and we are then able to bring that forward in the Northern Ireland Assembly as soon as possible?

Lucy Frazer: I thank the hon. Lady and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss the legislation, so that we can work together to ensure that as many women as possible are protected.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On Friday evening, I was at a constituency event, and Councillor Guy Jackson of Blaby District Council was aghast at how an arcane procedure of this House stopped what would have been a very important piece of legislation. Can I say on behalf of Councillor Guy Jackson and my constituents in South Leicestershire how welcome it is to have the Minister at the Dispatch Box today making the proposals that she is?

Lucy Frazer: I thank the hon. Lady. I am very much. I am pleased that we are able to bring in this legislation as soon as possible.
Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is right that this technology facilitates and increases the opportunities for people to harm women. She raises an important issue that is not in my portfolio, but I thank her for bringing it to the House’s attention.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I, too, was in Parliament on Friday—one of the few actually in the Chamber when the Bill was objected to—and, as others have said, the view of the House on both sides of the Chamber was made perfectly plain at the time. I warmly welcome the Minister’s personal assurance that the Bill will be brought through as quickly as possible, but will she confirm that there will be sufficient time not only on Second Reading but in Committee to ensure that the Bill is debated thoroughly and on the statute book as quickly as possible?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is something that I would wish to see.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Upskirting is an example of digital technology and criminality moving faster than the law. Legislation to tackle the criminal misuse of digital technologies and services includes at least 30 statutes and measures. Does not the Minister agree that a review of the sheer complexity of the legislation on digital crime is urgently required?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady points out that technology leads to more sexual acts being disseminated, and there are economic issues relating to digital technology. As I said earlier about the matters that fall within my portfolio, the Ministry of Justice is looking at this matter as it relates to sex and criminal offences, but I reiterate that the Bill deals with a specific issue that we think needs to be tackled and can be tackled immediately.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As one of the Members present in the Chamber when my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) objected, I shared the fury that many, including me, expressed vocally at the time, so I was pleased to hear the Minister announce that a Government Bill will come forward and that the CPS will still be encouraged to authorise charges under the existing law. Can she reassure me that the Bill will add to the portfolio available to the CPS to bring the most appropriate punishment for offenders.

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Lucy Frazer: I should point out that, while the legislation will largely protect women, it is not solely about women. It is about photographing up people’s clothes, and it will apply to men as well as women. It will also protect children.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Residents of Kettering back the legislation, and I will gladly support it. Does the Minister agree that legislation is improved when it is given parliamentary time, and that the advantage of the Government’s introducing the Bill is that a full debate on the issue will be guaranteed on Second Reading?

Lucy Frazer: I think that there is a role for private Members’ Bills and for the procedure, but I am pleased that the House will have an opportunity to scrutinise this legislation fully.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I think that today, at least, the whole House is in agreement that the upskirting offence should be on the statute book. It is a shame that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) does not design to be among us today as we discuss it. Does the Minister agree that the blocking of important legislation to protect women by a long-serving knight of the realm does nothing to enhance the reputation of this Parliament or its procedures?

Lucy Frazer: As I have mentioned—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would just say very gently to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) that I understand the anger in the House about this matter, but I must ask him whether he gave the hon. Member for Christchurch notice of what was a personal attack. Did he do so?

Gavin Newlands: No, Sir.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but Members really must observe the courtesies in this place, whatever the strength of feeling. To make a personal attack on another Member without giving prior notification, and to do it in the guise of putting a question to a Minister who is not responsible for that matter, is not the right thing to do. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s sincerity, and the circumstances, but we really must try to observe proper procedures. I hope the Minister will not mind if I say that she is answering the questions very fully and we are grateful to her for that, but this is not one that she needs to answer.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s response. I also welcome her statement that she will look very carefully at the experience we have had in Scotland in relation to the law that we have had since 2010. Does she agree that the overwhelming reaction to Friday’s business sends a clear message from this place that such behaviour will not be tolerated, and that perpetrators will be properly punished by facing up to two years in prison?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend has made an important point. I should mention again Gina Martin’s tremendous campaign, which brought this matter to the attention of the public. It is not just laws that are passed that dictate how people act; it is also people’s knowledge of the laws and sending a signal about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. This behaviour is not acceptable and should not be tolerated.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Part of the reason why the Bill was blocked last Friday was that the House had not had an opportunity to debate it fully. Following her welcome announcement, will the Minister tell us how many hours of debate she thinks will be required for Members to arrive at the conclusion that the taking of photographs underneath, mainly, women’s clothes by perverts is a bad thing?

Lucy Frazer: As I have mentioned, we will introduce the legislation on Thursday, and Second Reading will take place before the summer recess. The allocation of time will be dealt with in the usual way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I welcome the Government’s response to this issue because it has caused an outcry among people throughout the United Kingdom, and many of my constituents have written asking me to support the Bill. However, notwithstanding the actions of one Member—and others who have acted similarly—the fact that private Members’ Bills are stymied by means of objection is not a new issue. Does the Minister agree that we need to review the procedures of the House, so that the will of the majority of the House, who support good legislation and measures to stop the abuse of women, is recognised and they can see their legislation passed, against the wishes of some people who wish to stop that?

Lucy Frazer: What I am pleased about is that the Government have ensured that this legislation can be brought forward in Government time so that it can be passed and upskirting becomes a criminal offence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you have heard, I very much support the upskirting Bill, not least because of the work I have been doing with Emily Hunt.

Mr Speaker, you have always tried to ensure people outside this place better understand our procedures inside here and I ask you to do so again today. It has been stated in a number of places that my speech on the first Bill on Friday in some way blocked the progress of the upskirting Bill, which was the eighth Bill for consideration on Friday. Given that the Government on Friday had made it clear that they were going to talk out the second Bill for consideration, that of the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—a Bill which, incidentally, I also support—and given that, to the best of my knowledge, in the history of the House of Commons the eighth Bill for consideration has never been reached for debate on a Friday, can you confirm to the House, who support good legislation and measures to stop the abuse of women, is recognised and they can see their legislation passed, against the wishes of some people who wish to stop that?
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. As a matter of fact, I can confirm that if the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill had completed its passage on Friday afternoon before 2.30 pm, the next business would have been the second Bill on the Order Paper, the Freedom of Information (Extension) Bill of the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). Moreover, I can confirm that the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill was the eighth Bill on the Order Paper. For clarification and wider understanding outside the House, it is perhaps worth me emphasising that it was the eighth Bill because other Bills were put down over recent months by other Members, quite properly, before the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) brought her important Bill forward. I am advised—I have consulted specialist advisers who have in turn consulted their scholarly craniums—that nobody can recall an instance of the eighth Bill on a private Members’ Bill Friday being reached for debate.

People feel very strongly about what happened on Friday, and I completely understand that and have every respect, as I sought to indicate earlier, for the person who has brought forward the upskirting Bill, and the public-spirited Gina Martin who has campaigned so strongly for it.

Needless to say, the Chair is absolutely no obstacle to such a progressive measure. It is important, however, in public debate to distinguish between fact and opinion, and simply as a matter of fact—incontrovertible fact—the hon. Gentleman is in no way whatsoever responsible for the failure of the eighth Bill to be debated.

I should say to colleagues that the process whereby after the moment of interruption—2.30 pm on Friday—the objection of a single Member is enough to block for the time being a Bill being read a Second time may well not please many people inside and outside the House, and it is certainly not my role to defend the Standing Orders of the House from criticism that people may wish to express of them.

The Procedure Committee, under the outstanding chairmanship of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), has indeed devoted much effort in recent years to suggested improvements to the private Members’ Bill regime, but its proposals have not been put to the House. I myself have spoken regularly around the country of my personal belief that the private Members’ Bill procedure should be changed, and I treated of the matter in a lecture in Speaker’s House in October last year. The fact is, however, that proposals for change have not been put to the House, and it is not within the power of the Speaker to put them to the House.

I should point out, in fairness and for accuracy, so that no one is misled, that the rule about a single objection applies similarly to any other business before the House after the moment of interruption. Under Standing Order No. 9(6), “no opposed business shall be taken” after the moment of interruption.

I hope that colleagues will accept that I have said what I have said in a very low-key way simply because I think it is quite important, in a highly charged atmosphere, to put the facts on the record. The House can then proceed in relation to the procedure or in relation to a particular Bill as it thinks fit. Thank you—[Interruption.] Well, that is very good of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who has chuntered his enthusiasm from a sedentary position. I am extremely grateful to him; I mean that genuinely.
NHS Long-Term Plan

4.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday of a new long-term funding plan for the NHS. The NHS was built on the principle that good healthcare should be available for everyone, whatever their background and whatever their needs. Seventy years on, it remains this country’s most valued public service: an institution that is there for every family, everywhere, at the best of times and at the worst, so no one in this House underestimates the importance of putting the NHS on a steady financial footing, not just for the sake of their constituents but also for their own families and loved ones. That is why I am proud today that this Government have announced their commitment to a long-term funding settlement for the NHS.

From vaccinations to IVF, to radiotherapy and to next-generation immunotherapies, the NHS has always been at the forefront of excellence in medicine, but as only the sixth universal healthcare system in the world, it has also come to symbolise equity both at home and abroad. Despite pressures in recent years, the Commonwealth Fund rates the NHS as the best healthcare system in the world, cancer survival rates are at a record high, stroke mortality is improving faster than almost anywhere else in the OECD and heart disease mortality rates continue to fall. All this is thanks to NHS staff who continue to work tirelessly, day in, day out to make it the world-class service it truly is.

But alongside advances in medicine, demographic pressures pose a potentially existential threat to the NHS as we know it. With the number of over-75s expected to increase by 1.5 million in the next 10 years, these pressures, far from reducing, will intensify. So in March the Prime Minister made the bold decision to commit to a 10-year plan for the NHS backed up by a multi-year funding settlement. Since then I have been working closely with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, and I can today announce that the NHS will receive an increase of £20.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24—an average of 3.4% per year growth over the next five years. The funding will be front-loaded with increases of 3.6% in the first two years, which means £4 billion extra next year in real terms, with an additional £1.25 billion cash to cope with specific pension pressures. Others talk about their commitment to the NHS, but this settlement makes it clear that it is this Government that delivers, and the details will shortly be placed in the Library of the House.

This intervention is only possible due to difficult decisions taken by the Government—opposed by many—to get our nation’s finances back in order and our national debt falling. Some of the new investment in the NHS will be paid for by our no longer having to send annual membership subscriptions to the EU after we have left, but the commitment that the Government are making goes further, and we will all need to make a greater contribution through the tax system in a way that is fair and balanced. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that we will listen to views about how we do that and, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set out the detail in due course. I want to pay particular tribute to the Chancellor, whose careful stewardship of the economy—alongside that of George Osborne before him—is what makes today’s announcement possible.

The British public also, rightly, want to know that every pound in the NHS budget is spent wisely. It is therefore critical to the success of the plan that the whole NHS improves productivity and efficiency, eliminates provider deficits, reduces unwarranted variation in the system so that people get the consistently high standards of care wherever they live, gets better at managing demand effectively, and makes more effective use of capital investment. We have set the NHS five key financial tests to show how it will play its part in putting the service onto a more sustainable footing, and I will expect the NHS to give this work the utmost priority. The tests will be a key part of the long-term plan.

However, this is more than just a plan to get finances back on track. In its 70th year, we also want our NHS to make strides towards being the safest, highest-quality healthcare system in the world. That means making a number of improvements to the treatment and care currently offered, including getting back on track to delivering agreed performance standards, locking in and further building on the recent progress made in the safety and quality of care, and transforming the care offered to our most frail and vulnerable patients, so that we prioritise prevention as much as cure. It also means transforming our cancer care, where we still lag behind France and Germany despite record survival rates. There is no family in this country that has not been touched by cancer, so the whole House will want to know how the NHS intends to make our cancer treatment and care among the best in Europe.

Many of our constituents worry about the mental health of their loved ones, families and friends. Again, I am proud of this Government’s record here: investing more in mental health than ever before and legislating for true parity as part of one of the biggest expansions in mental health provision in Europe. A critical part of the plan will be to decide what next steps will enable us to claim not just that we aspire to parity of provision with mental health, but that we are actually delivering it.

For our most vulnerable citizens with both health and care needs, we also recognise that NHS and social care provision are two sides of the same coin. It is not possible to have a plan for one sector without having a plan for the other. Indeed, we have been clear with the NHS that a key plank of its plan must be the full integration of the two services. As part of the NHS plan, we will review the current functioning and structure of the Better Care Fund to make sure that it supports that. While the long-term funding profile of the social care system will not be settled until the spending review, we will publish the social care Green Paper ahead of that. However, because we want to integrate plans for social care with the new NHS plan, it does not make sense to publish it before the NHS plan has even been drafted, so we now intend to publish the social care Green Paper in the autumn around the same time as the NHS plan.

Finally, there are two further elements crucial to putting the NHS on a sustainable footing. Alongside the 10-year plan, we will also publish a long-term workforce plan recognising that there can be no transformation without the right number of staff, in the right settings and with the right skills. This applies to
both new and existing staff. As part of this, we will consider a multi-year funding plan for clinical training to support this aim. Similarly, we know that capital funding is critical for building the NHS services of the future and, again, we will consider proposals from the NHS for a multi-year capital plan to support the transformation plans outlined in the long-term plan.

Given the national economic situation, yesterday’s announcement is bold and ambitious. For the first time, national leaders of the NHS will develop a plan for the next decade that is clinically led, that listens to the views of patients and the public and that is backed by five years of core funding. We want to give the NHS the space, the certainty and the funds to deliver a comprehensive long-term plan to transform health and care and to ensure that our children and grandchildren benefit from the same groundbreaking health service in the next 70 years as we all have done in the first 70.

That is the Government’s commitment to our NHS, and I commend this statement to the House.

5.6 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement.

Today’s announcement is the clearest admission that eight years of cuts, of the tightest financial squeeze in its history and of privatisation have pushed the NHS to the brink. Is not the announcement of new potential legislation the clearest admission that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 has been a wasteful mess and should never have been introduced in the first place?

With waiting lists at 4 million, with winters in our NHS so severe that they were branded a “humanitarian crisis” and with 26,000 cancer patients waiting more than 60 days for treatment, Tory MPs should not be boasting today but should be apologising for what they have done to the NHS.

We have long called for a sustainable funding plan for the NHS, and I note that the Secretary of State did not use the words “Brexit dividend.” Is that because he knows—I say this for the benefit of his own Back Benchers—there is no such thing as a Brexit dividend? That is why the Institute for Fiscal Studies said with respect to the Brexit dividend that “over the period, there is literally zero available”.

If the Secretary of State disagrees with the IFS, will he confirm the Government’s own Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that there is no Brexit dividend initially for the public finances? Is it not the truth that this package will be paid for by extra borrowing and higher taxation? The Prime Minister should level with the British public and not take them for fools.

The Secretary of State is graceful enough to concede that higher taxation is on the way, but do the British public not deserve to know how much extra tax they will be paying? Will VAT go up under the Tories? Will the basic rate of income tax go up under the Tories? It is not good enough for him to say that these are matters for the Chancellor, because they are matters for the Cabinet of which he is a member.

Given that the Secretary of State is putting up tax and borrowing, and of course every £1 should be spent wisely, can he guarantee that not a further penny piece will be siphoned off into poor-quality, poor-value privatisation? Three years ago, he told us that the NHS would find £22 billion-worth of efficiency savings. How much of those efficiency savings came to fruition?

How much will the NHS be spending on agency workers and locums in the coming years? The NHS already spends £3 billion a year. Staffing gaps have led to clinical negligence claims of £1.7 billion a year, twice the rate of 2010. How much of this new money will go to further claims? The NHS spends £389 million a year on consultancy costs. Will consultancy costs increase, or will the Secretary of State cap them? With hospital trusts in deficit by £1 billion, can he guarantee that trusts will break even next year?

Is it not the truth, as expert after expert has said, that this settlement is not good enough to deliver the needed improvements in care? Indeed that is why the Prime Minister could not even confirm, when asked a basic question today, whether this funding will deliver the NHS’s constitutional standards on treatment waits, A&E waits and cancer waits.

Can the Secretary of State tell us whether, this time next year, the waiting list for NHS treatment will be higher or lower than the 4 million it is today? This time next year, will there be more or fewer patients waiting more than 60 days for cancer treatment? This time next year, will there be more than 2.5 million people waiting beyond four hours in accident and emergency or fewer? If he cannot give us basic answers to these fundamental performance target questions, that exposes the inadequacy of this settlement.

Why does the Secretary of State not tell us what was left out of this settlement? We have a childhood obesity crisis; we have seen cuts to sexual health services and to addiction services; and health visitor numbers are falling. Yet there is no new money for public health in this announcement—instead we are told to wait until next year. We have a £5 billion repair bill facing the NHS and outdated equipment, yet there is no new money for capital in this settlement—instead we are told to wait until next year.

On social care, we have had £7 billion in cuts and we have had 400,000 people losing care support. The social care Green Paper is delayed again. Is it not a total abdication of responsibility to have left social care out of this settlement? This is not a credible long-term funding plan for our NHS; it is a standoff settlement for the NHS. The reality is that under this plan the NHS will remain understaffed, under-equipped and underfunded—it needs to be under new management.

Mr Hunt: It was a valiant effort, but the hon. Gentleman could not get away from the truth in British politics: when it comes to the NHS, Labour writes the speeches. Conservatives write the cheques. He gamely managed to avoid smiling when he said that this settlement was not enough. He said the same thing on “Sunday Politics” yesterday. Let me remind him that at the last election his party was promising not the 3.4% annual increases that we are offering today, but 2.2%. What today he says was not enough he said in the election was enough to “restore the NHS to be the envy of the world.” His leader said that it would “give our NHS the resources it needs”.

What we are offering today is not 10% or 20% more than that, but 50% more. In five years’ time this Conservative Government will be giving the NHS £7 billion more
every year than Labour was prepared to give. [Interruption.]
It is funny, isn’t it, that Labour Members talk about funding the NHS but when we talk about it they try to talk it down? They do not want to hear the fact that under a Conservative Government there will be £7 billion more funding every year—that is 225,000 more nurses’ salaries under a Conservative Government. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in this Chamber. As is my usual practice, I was addressing Education Centre students via Skype this morning. They were from a primary school from Wythenshawe and Sale East. One of the youngsters said to me, “Is it not the case, Mr Speaker, that often Members speak very rudely to and at each other?” I could not dissent from that proposition. I think it would be helpful if Members calmed themselves. The Secretary of State is not the case, Mr Speaker, that often Members speak and Sale East. One of the youngsters said to me, “Is it

They were from a primary school from Wythenshawe Education Centre students via Skype this morning. As is my usual practice, I was addressing

Mr Hunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman said just now that there is “no such thing as a Brexit dividend”. I have heard lots of other people say that from a sedentary position. But what did their leader say on 26 February? These were his exact words: “and we will use the funds returned from Brussels after Brexit to invest in our public services and the jobs of the future”.

So who is right: is it the hon. Gentleman or his leader?

After paying the Brexit divorce bill this Conservative Government will use the contributions that would have gone to Brussels to fund our NHS—that is what the British people voted for. But the main reason we are able to announce today’s rise, one of the biggest ever single rises in the history of the NHS, is not the Brexit dividend but the deficit reduction dividend, the jobs dividend, the “putting the economy back on its feet” dividend, after the wreck left behind by the Labour party. Every measure we have taken to put the economy back on its feet has been opposed by the Labour party, but without those measures there would be no NHS dividend today; with the Conservatives you don’t just get a strong NHS, you get the strong economy to pay for it.

In the next few weeks, as Labour scrabbles around to raise its offer on the NHS, we will no doubt hear that it is offering more for the NHS, but when the Labour party comes forward with that offer, the British people will know that the only reason it has done so is that a Conservative Government shamed it into doing so with an offer far more generous than anything Labour was prepared to contemplate.

Another thing I have heard said about NHS funding is, “Whatever the Conservatives offer, we’ll match and do more,” but the trouble is that the opposite is true, because under this Government NHS spending in England is up 20% in the past five-year period, but in Wales it is up just 14%. That is to say that for every extra pound per head invested in England, in Wales it is just 84p, which is why people are 70% more likely to wait too long in A&Es in Wales. The right response to this statement would be for Labour to say that every additional penny though the Barnett formula will go into the NHS in Wales, but we did not hear that pledge.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about social care, and this matters. I fully agree with him that we need to have a strong plan for social care and that it needs to go side by side with the NHS plan, and we have made some important commitments to the social care sector today. But if he is going to criticise social care cuts, he might at least ask why austerity happened. It was not, as he continually suggests, because of an ideological mission to shrink the state, but to save our economy and create jobs so that we could reinvest in public services. The evidence for that is shown today, with the first ever five-year NHS funding plan, to go alongside a 10-year plan. This is a Conservative Government putting the NHS first and shooting to pieces his phoney arguments about Conservative values.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I recognise and thank the Secretary of State for his tireless efforts in making the case for this funding uplift and for a long-term plan. Will he now go further and set out whether, as a result of the extra funding, we will see an end to capital-to-revenue transfers? Will he also set out the role of transformation funding, because we all know that that is essential to get the best from the resources that we are going to add?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend asks two important questions. As she knows, we have committed to phase out capital-to-revenue funding, because if we are to make the NHS sustainable in the long run, we urgently need to make capital investment in estates, technology and a whole range of new machinery, including cancer-diagnostic machinery and so on, and we will not be able to do that if we continually have to raid capital funds for day-to-day running costs. That was one of the main reasons why we decided that we had to put revenue funding on a more sustainable footing. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that.

Transformation funding is also important, because when the five year forward view was published, pressures in secondary care and the acute sector meant that a lot of transformation funding was sucked into the hospital sector and we were not able to focus on the really important prevention work that can transform services in the long run. I am very sympathetic to the idea that we need, if not a formal ring fence, a pretty strong ring fence for transformation funding, so that the really exciting progress that we see in some parts of the country can start to spread everywhere.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I echo the comments made about the approach of the NHS’s 70-year anniversary across the four countries of the UK, having myself spent a fair chunk of those 70 years—perhaps slightly longer than I care to admit—working in the NHS.

Like most people present, I imagine, I absolutely welcome the additional funding, which has been described as bringing the UK to the same level of spending as France by 2023. In that description is, though, the admission that we do not spend the equivalent of what France spends right now. Indeed, we saw a deficit of almost £1 billion in 2017-18, despite transformation funding being sucked in to try to clear that deficit.
I echo what the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said: is transformation funding on top of this funding? If it is just revenue funding, will there be a separate announcement about transformation funding? The Secretary of State also mentioned the need for prevention, yet we do not see any mention of money for public health. That is where we need to be doing prevention.

It is said that we need a 3.9% increase in social care spending, but that is not identified in the statement. If the Green Paper is to come only in the autumn, social care may not get real funding until next year. With the demographic challenge that the Secretary of State mentioned, that is just too far away. The NHS has faced, on average, an uplift of 1.2% over the past eight years, according to the King’s Fund. Taking it up to 3.4% brings it more in line with the traditional uplifts that we have seen, and yet, in actual fact, with an ageing population, the pressure is even higher. Hopefully, this will stop the slide of the NHS, but the NHS Confederation says that it is not possible to transform on this kind of money. It is, therefore, important that these other projects are looked at separately and are funded separately.

As for where that money is to come from, I do not know how the Prime Minister kept a straight face when she talked about the Brexit dividend. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that there will not be a dividend. The Office for Budget Responsibility talks about a £15 billion drop in public service and finances. I want to know how the rise will be funded. Will it all be just borrowing and tax rises? The Government should be honest about how they will fund this rise.

Mr Hunt: First, may I thank the hon. Lady for doing something that the shadow Health Secretary did not do, which is to welcome this £20 billion annual rise in the NHS budget? I completely agree with her about the importance of prevention, the importance of social care and the importance of making sure that we sustainably invest in transformation funding. The think tanks do disagree on what level of rise is necessary. Lord Darzi and the Institute for Public Policy Research said 3.5%; we are on 3.4%, which is not far off that. The IPPR went a little higher, but, like the hon. Lady, Paul Johnson said that this will stop the NHS going backwards.

With respect to overall funding levels for the NHS, the United Kingdom currently funds the NHS at the western European average as a percentage of GDP. That is not as high as France or Germany and it is true that, by the end of this five-year period, our funding will end up at broadly similar levels to those of France today, although of course it may change them over the five-year period.

I gently say to the hon. Lady that if that is a worry for her, she needs to explain to NHS users in Scotland why, when NHS spending has increased by 20% in England over the past five years, it has increased by only 14% in Scotland because of choices made by the Scottish National party. For every additional pound per head invested in the NHS in England only 85p has been invested in the NHS in Scotland. I hope that she makes a pledge, as I hope Labour does with its responsibility for Wales, that every extra penny that she gets through the Barnett formula will go to the NHS, because that is what the voters in Scotland want.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As soon as we are fully out of the EU, there will indeed be a very big Brexit dividend, which a lot of us want to get on and enjoy here at home. Will the Secretary of State confirm that some of that money will be spent on training and educating and recruiting people already settled here into full-time NHS jobs to cut down on very expensive agency staff and to stop denuding the health services of poorer countries around the world?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. One thing that we have historically got wrong in the NHS is not having a long-term workforce plan. Whatever Members’ views on the Brexit debate, it was always a false economy to say that we could get away with not training enough people because we could import them from other EU countries. The truth is that we are not the only country with an ageing population: France, Spain and Portugal need their doctors and nurses as well, as indeed, as he rightly says, do poorer countries.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): For the sake of the record, is the Minister aware that, when John Major’s Government fell and Labour came into office, £33 billion was being spent on the national health service? By the time the Labour Government left office, they had trebled the amount of money in real terms to an average of 5.9%. People like me are proud of that achievement. The reason why the people will not listen to him and his 10-year plan is that he is the same man who, only two years ago, was calling on the junior hospital doctors to work seven days a week. He caused chaos in the national health service and he is not fit to run it.

Mr Hunt: May I gently say to the hon. Gentleman—

Mr Skinner: There’s no need to be gentle with me.

Mr Hunt: Okay, may I decisively say to the hon. Gentleman, if he was so proud of what the last Labour Government did, why did he say nothing when, at the last election, his party was only offering a 2.2% increase? If he thinks it is important to be generous, he should be welcoming what we are saying today.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly welcome this new money for the NHS in its 70th anniversary year. Does the Secretary of State agree that it should devote some of these new resources to more staff dealing with early diagnosis of cancer, to help more people beat this condition in accordance with the “Shoulder to Shoulder” campaign being run by Cancer Research UK?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree. In fact, the critical thing that we need to improve in our cancer care is diagnosing more people at stages 1 and 2, rather than at stages 3 and 4. That means more staff and more diagnostic machinery. One of the most encouraging points about Simon Stevens’s response to the new settlement was that he said that it will allow us to accelerate the improvements that we are making in cancer care.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I welcome this as a step in the right direction, but there is a complete absence of any clarity about how this will be funded. Given that, given—as he knows—the lack of any Brexit dividend and given that there has been nothing of detail at all on social care despite the Secretary of State recognising the need to bring health and social care together, can I tempt him again to engage in genuine cross-party discussions to reach a proper, long-term settlement, including consideration of a dedicated NHS and care tax?
Mr Hunt: With respect, this is a huge increase in NHS funding, the like of which I am not aware that the Liberal Democrats were proposing at the last election. Although I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the settlement, for him to stand up and say that it is not enough is not a satisfactory response. As he knows, we have actually put our money where our mouth is and demonstrated that we are committed to the NHS, with one of the biggest single injections of cash in the history of the NHS.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad that both my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister have welcomed the fact that all parties have supported the health service: the Liberals first with Christopher Addison, for whom my father once worked, in 1919; Henry Willink, a Conservative member of the coalition Government, in 1944; and Aneurin Bevan, who made some changes and nationalised the hospitals, rather than the family doctors. Both the resources and the reform are needed, and future generations will be grateful to this Government—hopefully with the support of other parties—for taking this forward.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. If there is ever a memorial built to Sir Henry Willink for his role in the White Paper that critically announced to this House that we were going to have a national health service, my hon. Friend should certainly be the person to unveil it because he has done a huge amount to make the point that, although Nye Bevan’s role was absolutely critical, other people in other parties also played a vital role.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Well done. But is it well done enough? For 20 years some of us have been calling for a reform of NHS and social care financing by showing that the public’s wish is for a reform of the national insurance base. When is the Secretary of State going to win that battle for us, please?

Mr Hunt: Given that I thought the response from the right hon. Gentleman’s Front Bench was a bit churlish, I am going to be very grateful for the fact that he said well done. I think that “well done enough” is what we know, we have actually put our money where our mouth is and demonstrated that we are committed to the NHS, with one of the biggest single injections of cash in the history of the NHS.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State closed by saying that he wants to transform health and social care, but every economic expert, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies to the Health Foundation, tells us that with a growing ageing population increasingly living with long-term conditions, this announcement will do nothing more than see the NHS stand still. Will he now admit that it is not enough to repair the damage of the past eight years of cuts to public health, GPs, and social care? How will he ensure that we have a service with new models of care fit for the 21st century?

Mr Hunt: It is funny, isn’t it: the hon. Lady says that this is not enough, but she did not say that when her own party was offering almost half the amount at the last election. She also says that every economic expert says that it is not enough. Let me tell her about one economic expert that does not say that—the Institute for Public Policy Research, left-leaning, in a piece of work done by Lord Ara Darzi, a former Labour Health Minister, who says that 3.5% is enough.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): May I wholeheartedly congratulate my right hon. Friend on this historic achievement in securing a long-term funding increase for the NHS? I suspect that it is because he is now the longest-serving Health Secretary that he has the credibility within Cabinet to secure this achievement. I also congratulate him on proposing to get the NHS to develop a 10-year plan alongside a long-term workforce plan—which is such a critical element of this—and a long-term capital funding plan, because this needs to be seen coherently alongside the social care Green Paper. Bringing them all together at the right time must be the right thing to do. Will he, as part of the deployment of this new-found funding, look to use the data revolution to innovate to ensure that we have world-class data driving better patient outcomes?

Mr Hunt: As usual, my hon. Friend speaks very perceptively. When he was a Minister in my Department, he did a fantastic job in getting our capital funding and our workforce planning into a much, much better place. He is right. Although this is a big opportunity for the NHS, we must not make the mistake of solving yesterday’s problems tomorrow. A huge data and tech revolution is about to happen in healthcare all over the world, and we must make sure that we are at the forefront of it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): How does the Secretary of State plan to lead the transformation from reactive hospital care to preventive community care? He has presided over a fall in community nurses, a fall in GP numbers, cuts to public health and social care, and widening health inequalities. How are the next five years going to be any different from the past five years?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what I presided over: 10,100 more doctors; 14,300 more nurses; the Commonwealth Fund saying that our healthcare system is the best in the world; the biggest expansion in
mental health provision; and improved outcomes for cancer, heart attacks, strokes and nearly every other disease category. I can do that because this Conservative Government have put the economy back on its feet. Everyone in the NHS knows that, in the end, that is how we get more resources into it.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Clinicians tell me that half of interventions have no value to the patient whatsoever, and yet the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency wages war on new entrants with inexpensive and effective remedies. There is plenty of scope for reform, isn’t there?

**Mr Hunt:** There certainly is. The pattern to date had been very different in tone between the two sides. My right hon. Friend is right to challenge the NHS on this, because the truth is that we do not adopt new treatments and new medicines nearly quickly enough. I hope that this new settlement will mean that we can change that.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have promised parity of esteem for mental health. Can the Secretary of State clarify whether there is a ring-fenced element of this funding for mental health?

**Mr Hunt:** I can clarify that NHS England has a mandatory—[Interruption.] I can confirm, if the Opposition would be kind enough to listen to what I am about to say, that NHS England has a mandatory mental health standard, which means that every CCG is required to increase its mental health funding by more than its total funding. That is an effective ring fence.

**David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): To follow on from the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), will the Secretary of State look at making greater use of the Professional Standards Authority’s accredited register of 85,000 practitioners? If he made it possible for them to refer to doctors, he would reduce the burden on doctors. That is a recommendation of that statutory body.

**Mr Hunt:** I am happy to look again at that issue, which I have looked at in the past for my hon. Friend.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome any new money for the NHS, but does the Secretary of State agree that prevention is better than cure? Durham County Council has had its public health budget cut every single year for the last eight years. Can he tell me how much of this new money will be going to public health, or is he now going to have another fight with the Treasury to get it to release more money for public health?

**Mr Hunt:** Today’s announcement is for NHS England’s core frontline services, but the right hon. Gentleman is right about the critical role of public health. Many of those services are delivered by the NHS, and we are very clear in what we are saying today and in a further announcement we will make in due course that there cannot be a transformation of the NHS without a proper emphasis on public health.

**Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): The Secretary of State recently visited my constituency, so he will be aware of the important capital investments in my area, such as the new St Luke’s Hospital in Market Harborough, the decision to keep Glenfield Hospital’s children’s heart unit and the brand new state-of-the-art A&E at Leicester Royal Infirmary. Does the Minister agree that capital investments that improve productivity have an important part to play in the long-term plan for the NHS? Does he also agree that Leicestershire would be a very good place to make those investments?

**Mr Hunt:** Leicestershire would, I am sure, be a very good place to make them. Indeed, my hon. Friend will know that there has been considerable capital investment in Leicestershire. He makes an important point: one of the real benefits of a long-term plan is that we can create a stable environment for capital investment. One of the problems we have had is that when the budget is set hand to mouth, year in, year out, people do not make long-term investments in things such as IT systems. We have to put that right.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is important to be honest about where public spending is coming from. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government’s own estimates, released in part by the Brexit Select Committee, show that far from there being a Brexit dividend, the plan that they are set to follow is scheduled to increase public borrowing by £55 billion a year by the end of the forecast period, meaning that this spending will have to be funded in spite of Brexit, not because of it?

**Mr Hunt:** It is a matter of fact that when we leave the EU we will not have to pay membership subscriptions. There will be a divorce bill, and when that is settled, those subscriptions will be available for the NHS, which was exactly what the British people voted for. The right hon. Gentleman is talking about the projections for the economy in the meantime. All I will say is that there is a lot of debate about those projections. They have not always been right in the past, and the British economy has been much more resilient than many people predicted.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): An announcement of the largest ever new injection of funds into the NHS is a triumph for our longest ever serving Health Secretary and the Prime Minister, because it shows the outstanding priority of this Government. Every Member of the House should welcome that. When my right hon. Friend looks at productivity gains in the NHS, will he focus on the implementation of IT projects? Although Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust does a remarkable job in many ways and its staff work unbelievably hard, the expensive and underperforming Smartcare project could have been better done.

**Mr Hunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for hosting me at his local hospital, which was very informative. He is absolutely right: it is an enormous cause of frustration to staff throughout the NHS that so many of our hospital systems are, frankly, antediluvian. We must put that right, because so many nurses could spend so much more time with patients if they were not having to fill out forms, and the same is true for doctors.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): We cannot put the NHS on a steady financial footing without a proper funding settlement for social care, yet the Secretary of
State now says that that will not happen until the spending review, which in reality means no substantial extra money for social care until 2020 at the earliest. We cannot transform care for older people or reduce pressure on the NHS until we look at the two together. Why are the Government still ducking this vital issue?

**Mr Hunt:** I always listen to the hon. Lady very carefully when she talks about the social care sector. I would say to her that while we are not announcing a new long-term plan for social care today, we are making some very important commitments to the NHS and the social care system, including the commitment that we will not allow the pressure from the social care system on the NHS to increase further. That means that, even before the date she mentioned, we are going to have to look very carefully at the settlement for social care.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, whose commitment to our NHS is very clear. Does he agree with me, however, that the Commonwealth Fund indicator that it has to be said that that was from a very low base, and fastest improving Commonwealth Fund countries. However, was actually one of the areas in which we are one of the best at improving outcomes for stroke, cancer and heart attack, on all of which we still lag well behind countries with which we can reasonably be compared?

**Mr Hunt:** I absolutely agree 100% with my hon. Friend, and we really must look at outcomes. The Commonwealth Fund was kind enough to say that really matters concerns clinical outcomes, some of which he referred to in his statement, and on that the news is not good? Will he do everything he can to make sure that the increased funding he has announced today is absolutely dedicated to improving outcomes for stroke, cancer and heart attack, on all of which we still lag well behind countries with which we can reasonably be compared?

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we get the facts straight? The Welsh NHS is spending 8% more per head on NHS and social care combined than in England—per head—so let us not have any more stories about the Welsh NHS.

It is absolutely clear that there is no Brexit dividend. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says it, the Financial Times says it and the Government’s own analysis from the Treasury shows it. What is more, Brexit is already having a cost. The Home Office has had to have an extra almost £500 million in the past two years to pay for Brexit preparations, such as registering EU nationals, which would pay the salaries of 20,000 nurses. Will the Secretary of State admit that that is what is really going on—a Brexit deficit, not a dividend?

**Mr Hunt:** We do need to get the facts straight about what is happening in Wales. A&E performance is over 8% lower in Wales, according to the latest figures, which means that Welsh NHS patients are 70% more likely to wait too long in their A&Es than patients in England.

The Welsh Government have taken a series of decisions not to invest every penny available in the Welsh NHS, which is why spending has risen at a slower rate. Had they not done so, hundreds of millions more could have gone into the Welsh NHS.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): On Friday, I was lucky enough to visit the award-winning neck of femur service at the great Horton General Hospital. The length of time that patients stay is very dependent on great links between the hospital and social care. Does my right hon. Friend agree that spending to save is possible, so that even more of this great funding can be spent on patient returns?

**Mr Hunt:** Absolutely. The most important way of spending to save is to invest in prevention, and a lot of that work comes from strong local hospitals. Before my hon. Friend finally leaves this place, I have no doubt at all that her local hospital will be called not the Horton General Hospital, but the Great Horton General Hospital.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that without the reinstatement of the nursing bursary, we cannot even hope to train enough nurses. The figures show that the numbers training have fallen—this is a serious inquiry—and until we can train enough nurses, we can talk about extra nurses, but we will always need agency nurses. Does he agree that we need to reintroduce the nursing bursary so that people can afford to train?

**Mr Hunt:** The reason why we took what I fully accept was a very difficult decision was that we wanted to fund the training of an additional 5,000 nurses every year. When there is a reform of higher education funding, there is always an initial dip in applications. In this case, record numbers of 18 to 19-year-olds applied, but there was a dip among mature students. That is why we have introduced the apprenticeship route. We need to make sure that that works if that dip is to be reversed.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Like all colleagues in the House, I am a great supporter of community hospitals. Under the latest Dorset clinical commissioning group review, Portland Community Hospital is to be replaced with a medical hub on the island. Will the extra money allow the CCG to review the review, and perhaps save hospitals such as Portland Community Hospital?

**Mr Hunt:** Obviously, that would be for the CCG to look at; it will focus on anything that allows it to focus on prevention and not cure. I do not know the specifics of that case, but in general there is a strong and important role for community hospitals, although not always doing exactly the same things they have done in the past. Often, they can become local NHS hubs, offering a wide range of services. That tends to be the best way to preserve their future.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Standing at that Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State made the astonishing claim that when it comes to NHS funding, the Conservatives write the cheques and Labour writes the speeches. Let me tell him about increases in health spending under every Government in my lifetime: a measly 1.4% increase under David Cameron; 2.7% under Mrs Thatcher; even John Major managed a better 4.7%. It was only under the Labour Governments of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair that we saw increases in NHS spending of 5.4%, under Gordon Brown, and 6.1%, under Tony Blair. Does that not demonstrate that we cannot trust the Conservatives
on the Brexit dividend and we cannot trust their claims on NHS spending? Until the Conservatives sort out social care and public health spending, the Labour Governments will have a record that this Government cannot even begin to touch.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman has just proved my point about Labour making speeches about the NHS. He talked about a “measly” increase under David Cameron; what he forgot to tell the House was that his own party’s plans that year were to cut the NHS budget because of the train crash of an economy that they left the country with.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): This is a massive and welcome boost for our NHS, and I very much welcome it. Will my right hon. Friend say more about the importance of public health and social care in the context of his announcement today and what his plans are? The issue is not just about getting people to live longer, but getting them to live well for longer.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend asks a very smart question. The truth is that no healthcare system anywhere in the world, faced with our demographic challenge, would ever feel it had enough money unless it transformed its model of care to one based on prevention rather than cure. That is why public health and the social care system are absolutely critical. One of the big lessons that we need to learn with this new funding is to spend it in a way that brings down the long-term rate of growth in demand for hospital services. That is the only way in which we can make it work.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): World-leading childhood cancer research and treatment take place in Newcastle, but those leading that research are clear that there is no sight of a Brexit dividend, given the loss of EU staff and the uncertainty hanging over intra-EU collaboration and EU funding. Rather than peddling Brexit mythology, will the Secretary of State take on board those very genuine and very serious concerns?

Mr Hunt: We have taken on the concerns of everyone in the NHS. Whether someone agrees with Brexit or the Brexit dividend, the Government are making a commitment for a £20 billion annual increase in the NHS budget in five years’ time. I hope that will help people in Newcastle and everywhere else in the country.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): As the Labour Welsh Government are the only Government in recent times to reduce funding for the NHS, will my right hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that the very welcome £1.2 billion that will come to Wales under the Barnett formula will not be spent on another Welsh Labour Government pet project, but will be spent on the health of the people of Wales?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks on behalf of not just his constituents but all NHS users in the whole of Wales who are asking themselves why it is that their Government have chosen not to invest in the NHS in the way that has happened in England, as a result of which they have much longer waits in their A&Es.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. I congratulate him on staying the course, and on his perseverance and dedication. I say very well done. It has been indicated that the Northern Ireland Department of Health will also benefit over the next few years. What discussions have taken place with the Northern Ireland Department of Health to ascertain the monies to be allocated, and the focus and priorities?

Mr Hunt: This is, as the hon. Gentleman knows, a devolved matter, but I would say that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are all on the same journey when it comes to the NHS. We are all moving to integrated out-of-hospital care built around the person and focused on prevention. In one respect, Northern Ireland has gone further faster than anywhere in the UK. I refer to the integration of the health and social care systems. There is plenty we can learn from them and they from us.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this very welcome announcement and reiterate what others have said about the importance of prevention and public health. Since this is a long-term settlement, may I ask him to ensure that the disparities between various parts of England are narrowed over the coming years? They are too great, with some getting £300 or £400 a year person less than other areas. That is just too much of a difference.

Mr Hunt: I totally take on board what my hon. Friend says. I am happy to engage with him and with NHS England. As he knows, we have taken the politics out of that particular process by giving it to NHS England, which I think is the right thing to do. I know NHS England would be happy to engage with him on that.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome long-term planning in funding for the NHS, which is needed. However, as chair of the all-party group for disability, I know there are concerns that the learning disability workforce has fallen by a third, learning disability training is not yet compulsory and there are 1,200 avoidable deaths in the learning disability population annually. In Learning Disability Week, people are asking to be treated well. Will the Secretary of State prioritise this area and make sure our most vulnerable people with learning disabilities are no longer left behind?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for asking that important question. We have introduced a £10,000 golden hello for postgraduates who go into the learning disability field. She is right that we have had particular pressure on the learning disability workforce. In the aftermath of Mid Staffs, there has been a whole range of measures to improve hospital ward staffing ratios for nurses and that has had an impact on learning disability nurses. That is absolutely something we hope to address with this new funding.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I echo the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on the role of community hospitals as the segue between the acute sector and patients going home. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, with this very welcome
new money coming into the health service, the drive for efficiencies and increases in productivity will continue and indeed be increased to ensure that the biggest bung—the biggest bang is felt for those bucks?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right not to use the word “bung” in his question and to correct that very quickly indeed. He is also right to talk about productivity. The last Labour Government made important progress in bringing down waiting times. That required significant extra resources. When Alan Milburn had a 10-year plan, there was not a big productivity element to it. This time, when resources are much tighter, we have to make sure that productivity and efficiency gains are at the heart of the progress we make.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is right that more funding is urgently needed, because he knows better than anyone that the percentage of NHS trusts in deficit rose from 5% in 2010 to 44% last year. Today, he has talked repeatedly about prevention, but he has failed to say directly what will happen to public health. Will he therefore clarify whether any of the settlement he has announced today will go towards public health services, vital for prevention and tackling health inequalities, which are being cut by £800 million over five years?

Mr Hunt: Today’s settlement covers NHS frontline services. As I explained in the statement, it does not cover public health, but we fully recognise its importance. The hon. Lady talks about the increase in trust deficits. It is true that the number of hospitals in deficit has gone up, but that is because we deliberately decided to be very careful in the way that we performance-managed trusts with deficits. In Mid Staffs, getting rid of the deficit was one of the reasons why the number of nurses in wards was stripped down to totally inappropriate levels. We have to make sure that we handle this in an appropriate way.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): This announcement is really welcome and the Secretary of State’s commitment shines forth. The financial commitment is much needed, but, as two GPs said to me on the platform as I left Taunton this morning, waste in the NHS must be tackled, as well as funding. On top of that, best practice systems must be introduced, particularly in the cancer pathway.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend knows about that from her own family experience and I thank her for telling me about some of the challenges she has had in the interests of improving them for all NHS patients. She is right that one of the biggest opportunities the NHS has is to standardise best practice across the whole health economy. We collect, share and publish more data than any other healthcare system anywhere in the world, so we have the chance to get this right in a way that is not possible in other countries. I know we are absolutely determined to do so.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Given the crisis in access to NHS dentistry, in particular for our children, will the Secretary of State confirm that dentistry will get its fair share of this funding in line with demand?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady campaigns hard on this issue and I believe she is meeting the Minister with responsibility for dentistry tomorrow to talk about it further.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I warmly welcome this enormous funding boost, which is far in excess of that proposed by any Opposition party. Does my right hon. Friend agree that local trusts should consider using these further resources to help to attract and retain additional doctors in tough-to-recruit fields such as emergency medicine, to support and extend A&E in hospitals such as Cheltenham General Hospital?

Mr Hunt: Of course I agree with that. My hon. Friend campaigns extremely vigorously on behalf of his own hospital in Cheltenham. Recruitment will be one of our top priorities. One way we want to tackle that is very simply by giving hope to people in the NHS and to people thinking of going into medicine that there is a long-term plan that has the support of the NHS, and which is at one remove from the party politics that we always get around the NHS. I think that is something doctors and nurses overwhelmingly want.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): How much of this welcome additional money will be used simply to pay off accumulated debt and current deficits, and how much will be a real increase?

Mr Hunt: The think-tanks who pore over the numbers disagree on that. Some say that it is about enough to stabilise the current situation—that is what Paul Johnson of the IFS says—and others say there is enough room to transform. Who is proved right will depend on how much we do on productivity and efficiency to create the headroom for the real changes we all want to see. That is why we have to get that bit of the equation right.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): An extra £20 billion a year in real terms in five years’ time is a massive financial boost for the NHS. The Secretary of State knows Kettering General Hospital well because he has been there twice. Would he ensure that just £20 million to £30 million of that goes on funding the new urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital, which everyone says is what the hospital desperately needs?

Mr Hunt: I am feeling extremely generous this afternoon, and it is incredibly tempting just to say yes, but I think I had better not and say that my hon. Friend should follow the right processes. However, Kettering could not have a stronger advocate than him.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Given that the Secretary of State has confirmed this afternoon that increased NHS funding will not be wholly accounted for by any fantastical Brexit dividend, could he clarify whether the Welsh Government will be expected to increase the Welsh rates of income tax if the UK Government’s promise of an additional £1.2 billion for Wales is to be realised?

Mr Hunt: Any funding commitment made by the UK Government will be appropriated to Wales in accordance with the Barnett formula. That is the procedure that we
have followed. The choice for the Welsh Government is whether they put all that money into the NHS or, as they have done in the past, choose to prioritise it elsewhere.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement that some of the subscriptions that we will no longer be paying to the European Union will be redeploled for the national health service. Under the last Labour Government, Crawley Hospital lost its A&E department and its maternity department. Over the last eight years, services have been returning. Can I have an assurance that this additional spending on the NHS will follow through with the return of further local services?

Mr Hunt: It absolutely needs to boost local services. If there is one lesson that we have learnt from the last few years, it is that we will not, in the long run, crack the funding pressures in our health system unless we find a way of properly investing in local services, which I know my hon. Friend has campaigned for so hard.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): An omission from this otherwise welcome statement was any mention of capital spending. It is vital for future health outcomes in the Black country and west Birmingham that the midland metro hospital, currently half built and suspended following Carillion’s collapse, is completed. Will the Secretary of State tell me where in this package the funding will be found for that, and when?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue, which is of great concern to us, as I know it is to him. The Minister of State responsible for hospitals, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), visited the trust last Thursday and I know is working incredibly hard to try to resolve that situation as soon as possible.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his very welcome intervention in ensuring the longevity of our NHS with these wonderful proposals. Will he give some consideration to the way in which doctors are trained? At present, it is a costly and time-consuming affair. Only around 10 UK medical schools have a graduate entry system. In his long-term plan, looking at recruitment, will he consider how the skillset that we see among our population—for example, medical scientists and other related professionals—can best be harvested in training future medics?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend asks a profoundly important question. The medical school students who are going to medical school this year will become consultants in 2031 at the earliest, so we have to make sure that we update the way people are trained for the totally different world that they will be facing in terms of technology, medical innovation and the demarcations and roles inside hospitals and community care. This is very much part of the long-term workforce plan that will be announced alongside the NHS long-term plan later this year—it is what that will be about.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I also welcome the statement from the Secretary of State, but I note that it relates to health spending in England only. Will the Secretary of State spell out what this means for Scotland and how much of the money announced today is contingent on the Brexit dividend, so that they can bank for the future based on how much will actually materialise come autumn?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that all this money will materialise, because this is a Government that keep their promises. If he is so worried about the Brexit dividend, he should be speaking not to me but to his own leader, who said that he wants to “use funds returned from Brussels after Brexit to invest in our public services”.

Have a word with him!

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I can understand why some in Government think that there is a Brexit dividend. After all, we know that the Health Secretary’s colleagues in the Home Office have been given enough money from Brexit to cover the cost of 20,000 nurses. His colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been given 14,000 nurses’ worth of money and even his colleagues in the taxman’s office have been given 11,000 nurses’ worth of money. I am sure that the Secretary of State would not want to betray the good will of a single doctor, nurse, cancer patient or future patient by making promises that he cannot keep, so can he tell us, once and for all, whether he personally believes that there is a Brexit dividend—yes or no?

Mr Hunt: I have answered this many times, and I am very happy to answer it again. Yes, we will be able to access extra funding by not paying subscriptions to Brussels once the divorce bill has been settled, and that will mean many thousands of extra nurses.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I and my constituents warmly welcome this extra money for the NHS. Does the Secretary of State agree that the British public are not stupid? They, unlike some of the Opposition, are well aware that any and all Government expenditure always comes from taxation, either now or in future. We have listened. We have had a conversation. They have told us that they want more spending on the NHS. We have said, “But that may mean you paying more taxes,” and they have said, “Fine, it’s that important.” Is that not a good and honest agreement between the public and the Government?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend could not have put it better. The only surprise here is that having spent years and years saying that we should invest more in the NHS through the tax system, when the Government actually stand here and say that is what they are doing, the Opposition tell us that they are against it.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Whether it is mentioned by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition or anyone else, there is only one fact about the Brexit dividend, and that is that it does not exist. Will the Secretary of State tell all the staff in the NHS how much of the money announced today is contingent on the Brexit dividend, so that they can bank for the future based on how much will actually materialise come autumn?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that all this money will materialise, because this is a Government that keep their promises. If he is so worried about the Brexit dividend, he should be speaking not to me but to his own leader, who said that he wants to “use funds returned from Brussels after Brexit to invest in our public services”.

Have a word with him!
there will be £1 per head available for the NHS in Scotland. The Scottish National party has chosen to invest only 84p of every £1, which is why people in Scotland are 30% more likely to wait too long for their elective care in Scotland. That is a choice made by the SNP in Scotland and I hope that it will do it differently this time.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome any additional funding because, let us face it, it is not just the NHS that is in deep crisis, but social care, too. However, as others have said, it is still not enough—3.5% was the minimum that was needed to see actual improvements. What assessment has the Secretary of State done to gauge what the improvements will be in the next 12 months? What financial scenarios is the Chancellor considering, and will the Secretary of State commit to stop tendering health services to the private sector, which is a waste of money for the public?

Mr Hunt: It is really extraordinary that on a day that we have announced a £20 billion annual rise in the NHS budget—you could not get a bigger commitment from a Government to state-funded healthcare—Labour is still running off down the rabbit hole of privatisation. If it is any reassurance to the hon. Lady, last year the proportion of NHS services contracted to the private sector went up by the enormous amount of zero.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): This statement is very welcome, but I have raised in this place before how the money is distributed around the UK; it is well known that the south-west gets about 2% less a year of increased NHS funding. When the Secretary of State has a moment, will he look again at how funding is distributed, and ensure that as it increases, it is increased fairly?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. My hon. Friend asks the same question as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). These matters are now decided at arm’s length by NHS England because we think that the fairest way is to take the politics out of it, but I am happy to work with him to engage with NHS England on the Cornish questions.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I listened to what the Secretary of State said earlier about how there can be no transformation of the NHS without a proper emphasis on public health. How will the planned £800 million of cuts to public health help with that transformation, particularly when it comes to tackling the child obesity crisis, the growing sexual health services crisis and the cuts to addiction services, which are causing enormous problems for individuals and the communities now having to deal with them?

Mr Hunt: I fully recognise the pressures the hon. Lady is talking about. I said what I said about public health because I do not believe there is a sustainable long-term solution to NHS funding pressures unless we have an equally sustainable solution for public health, and indeed for social care, which she also talks about. She will have to wait for us to negotiate our next spending review settlement to understand how we intend to address those.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and congratulate him on securing cross-Government support for his proposals. He rightly said that every pound must be spent wisely, and he will know that there is great variation in procurement across the NHS. What will he do to ensure better procurement?

Mr Hunt: We will set up a single, central procurement system so that every hospital in the NHS can benefit from the efficiencies gained from bulk buying, but we have to do that in a way that does not shut out smaller companies from bidding for NHS contracts.

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Government’s new NHS funding includes no additional funding for social care. The Secretary of State has said that the Government will publish a social care Green Paper in the autumn. Will he confirm—yes or no—whether the Green Paper will include social care funding for working-age disabled adults?

Mr Hunt: We will consider the provision for working-age disabled adults as part of our review of the whole social care system, because that is extremely important.

Marsha de Cordova: Will it be in the Green Paper?

Mr Hunt: We are doing that work in parallel to the Green Paper, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight it.

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

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Afzal Khan.

Afzal Khan: Will the Secretary of State clarify how this money will be divided between the regions? Children growing up in the north, in constituencies such as mine, have vastly different life chances from their counterparts in the south. We do not want this funding to reinforce the north-south divide.

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we take deprivation into account very seriously when we allocate NHS funding, because it has a direct impact on people’s demand for NHS services, but other things also have an impact on people’s health, such as housing and employment prospects. The bigger lesson is that we need to integrate all our services for our most disadvantaged citizens.

Matt Warman rose—

Mr Speaker: I apologise to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who was missed out just now, but he has the compensation of knowing that he has an adoring audience who now await his important question.

Matt Warman: I would never accuse you of misleading the House, Mr Speaker.

I welcome this bold, ambitious and sufficient funding settlement. Does the Secretary of State agree that over this period we will be able to eliminate not just the funding inequalities but the workforce inequalities so that units such as paediatrics at Pilgrim Hospital no longer face the kind of challenges we have historically?
Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is a big priority for us, which is why this year we will publish a final 10-year NHS workforce plan, at the same time as the NHS plan that Simon Stevens is putting together. Together they are designed precisely to avoid shortages in particular and very important specialties.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Community pharmacies feel stretched at the moment, yet they are well placed, at the heart of the community, to have a real impact by taking pressure off GPs. Will the Secretary of State give a commitment that some of this money will go to reinforce the strength of community pharmacies so that they can play their part in prevention as well as cure?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right that community pharmacies have a vital role to play. I do not think we use them enough. We need to find better ways for them to help us in the prevention agenda, and one way we are doing that is by integrating medical records so that they can be accessed by pharmacies, which will help them to give good advice to patients.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on the issue of transformation and his hint—I think—at ring-fencing? If the people of Bristol South are to be asked to spend more money on the NHS, how will they know that it is being used to improve health outcomes and not simply to bail out local hospital deficits?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to ask that question, and I encourage her to hold her local NHS to account on that. There are some simple metrics, which we can share with her, that can tell us whether the NHS is using the money wisely, and one of them is whether her local hospitals are managing to reduce their emergency admissions by providing better care in the community.

She is right that it is the litmus test of whether the money is being spent wisely.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), particularly in relation to profoundly disabled adults, who need not just excellent healthcare, not even just excellent physical and social care, but access to services that maximise their social participation? Will he say a little more about the work being done in parallel with the social care Green Paper?

Mr Hunt: I want to reassure the hon. Lady that, in all our discussions about core social care funding and the funding accessed by local councils, we discuss working-age disabled adults every bit as much as the frail elderly. They are central. Many councils actually spend more on that group than on older people. We will not crack the social care problem unless we take that group of people extremely seriously.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State talked about mental health funding without mentioning the crisis facing our young people. He knows that across the country there are appalling waiting times to access child and adolescent mental health services. How significant is today’s announcement to tackling that issue?

Mr Hunt: It is very significant, first, because we have been clear that a transformation in mental health is central to our ambition for the new 10-year plan, and secondly, because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Green Paper will over that period see the number of people employed in looking after young people with mental health problems increase from 9,000 by an additional 8,000—a near doubling in the size of the workforce. This financial plan gives us the confidence to say we can deliver that.
Points of Order

6.18 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to draw your attention to the events surrounding the walk-out of Scottish National party Members during Prime Minister’s Question Time last Wednesday and to ask for your help. As they left the chamber, walking near to the Government Benches, several of their number behaved in a threatening and overly aggressive manner, shouting and gesturing in the direction of me and other Scottish Conservative colleagues. Mr Speaker, we fully expect and anticipate debates in Parliament to be robust, and we ourselves, as I am sure you have noticed, engage in proceedings robustly, but I believe that this behaviour went well over the register of what might be reasonably considered as acceptable.

Mr Speaker, as I have previously reported to you, since our election last year, Scottish Conservative Members have been targeted by online trolls and subjected to a constant stream of threats and abuse, including death threats. Several instances have been reported to the police and there have been court appearances. Our constituency offices have been targeted for aggressive nationalist demonstrations and our staff subjected to vile threats and intimidation. The sad reality is that the ramped-up rhetoric of last Wednesday inevitably triggers a renewed stream of such abuse.

My constituency office in Borestone Crescent, Stirling, which has been vandalised several times in my first year as a Member, was again attacked overnight on Wednesday. An unknown person or persons spray painted the words “traitor” and “lies” on the exterior walls. This latest incident has also been reported to Police Scotland.

Bearing this mind, Mr Speaker, I raise it reluctantly, but I believe that this behaviour went well over the register of what might be reasonably considered as acceptable.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise his point of order.

I agree that Members on both sides of the House should practise self-restraint in the Chamber, and should recognise the impact of their actions. We should all recognise the impact of our actions on those outside the House.

My constituency office in Borestone Crescent, Stirling, which has been vandalised several times in my first year as a Member, was again attacked overnight on Wednesday. An unknown person or persons spray painted the words “traitor” and “lies” on the exterior walls. This latest incident has also been reported to Police Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise his point of order.

I agree that Members on both sides of the House should practise self-restraint in the Chamber, and should recognise the impact of their actions. We should all recognise the impact of our actions on those outside this place. I appreciate that passions were high on Wednesday, and indeed they may still be high, but it is precisely when passions run high that we, across the House, should remember the importance of treating each other with courtesy and respect.

I would also say to the hon. Gentleman that—as I said the other day—each day is a new opportunity for the House. That is true today, as it is true on every other occasion.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raise it reluctantly, but I feel that I must do so, because it concerns an attack on my personal honour by another Member of Parliament, outside the House.

Last Wednesday, Mr Speaker, I was invited, on the “PM” programme, to defend your speakership. The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) was asked to speak on the same programme, because he dissents from the view that I was expressing. It was a good, robust exchange, as you would expect from the hon. Gentleman and me. At the very end of the programme, however, the hon. Gentleman said:

“Barry’s defence of the speaker is relentless. Barry has been in politics a long time. So he has probably been on the Speaker’s Panel, which is quite a lot of extra money and that’s at the Speaker’s discretion. So he is not impartial.”

I found that extremely disturbing and damaging. It was the last item on the programme. The BBC cut me off so I could not respond, and I have found the programme’s editor, Victoria Waley, to be totally unhelpful in terms of securing any redress.

Two million people listened to the programme and heard that false assertion, Mr Speaker. I have never been on the Speaker’s Panel, and I support you as Mr Speaker because in my 39 years in the House, I have not seen anyone in the Chair who was as good as you at bringing this Parliament to life. I am in a very difficult position. This canard is out there, and I have no other way of raising it than with my colleagues. I appeal to you to give me some guidance in respect of that behaviour.

Mr Speaker: I think it important for us to try as far as possible—all of us—to disagree agreeably. It is not necessary to disagree while impugning the motives of opponents in the process. I did not witness that exchange, but I have since been told of it. What I can do from the Chair is confirm that the hon. Gentleman is not a member of the Speaker’s Panel of Chairs, and that, in my nearly nine years as Speaker, he has, to my knowledge, never asked to be. Moreover, he has just made the point that he has never been a member of the Speaker’s Panel of Chairs.

The hon. Gentleman expresses the views that he expresses whether people agree with him or not—or sometimes agree with him and sometimes do not—because those are the views that he holds. It is quite wrong for Members, without any evidence, to accuse other Members of what is, in effect, dishonourable behaviour. The hon. Gentleman and I have been in the House together for the last 21 years, and I simply want to say that in my experience he is a person of absolute integrity. He is an extremely long-serving and very respected Member of the House. I appeal to colleagues who want to conduct arguments, whether on policy matters, personalities or office holders, to do so on the basis that it is possible for Members to hold different opinions without having some ulterior motive for holding or expressing those opinions.

I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman, and I hope it will not be necessary for him to raise this matter with me again. I hope it will be accepted that what he has said is factually true and incontrovertible.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It will have come to your attention, and to the attention of many Members, that a massive cultural disaster occurred in Glasgow over the weekend when a conflagration consumed Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art.

This was clearly a disaster of not just national but international significance, and, as shadow Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, I feel that it is incumbent on me to raise the issue with the Chair. The country faces the massive and urgent issue of a huge cultural loss. Mr Speaker, and I ask for your advice on how the House can both express its sentiments and call on the Government to recover that huge cultural asset for our country. How can we hold the Government to account, and ensure
that they raise their game and deliver the restoration of a wonderful asset to the people of Scotland and the wider world?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I share the real misery that he and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of other people will feel about what is a terrible tragedy, and a terrible tragedy that is the worse for the fact that it was the second in four years to engulf and threaten the future of an iconic building, as well as damaging a great many other buildings in the vicinity.

The hon. Gentleman very properly—if I heard him correctly—did not refer to an urgent question application, because Members are not supposed to refer to unsuccessful urgent question applications; but I will simply say that, as colleagues will understand, I must take account of the range of business before the House. Two urgent questions were granted because I felt that they warranted being aired on the Floor of the House, but a number of other urgent questions that might have been selected on a different day were not chosen for today.

What I will say to the hon. Gentleman, and to all other Members who are similarly interested in this matter—Members with Scottish constituencies but also, potentially, those from other parts of the country—[Interruption.] Indeed, that includes the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I beg the hon. Lady’s pardon. What I would say to Members is that it is open to a Minister to offer an oral statement to the House on the matter, but if they want a failsafe that will guarantee that the matter will be aired, they know what options are open to them.

I do apologise to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. I did not intend her any discourtesy at all. I did not have it in my mind, because I was responding to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), but in so far as she is making the point that she has a very, very direct interest in the matter, I completely respect that.

What I am trying to signal to colleagues is that they should have an opportunity to air this matter by one means or another in the course of the next day or two. I hope that that is helpful.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would appreciate your advice on what I think is a serious issue in relation to the provision of information on how many scientists and engineers had been refused a Tier 2 (General) certificate of sponsorship since November 2017 due to the annual cap having been reached. Despite the Home Office acknowledging that it held this information and not indicating that it would require disproportionate cost to compile it, it declined to provide it to me. However, the information was later released in response to a freedom of information request by the Campaign for Science and Engineering, with which I had been working on the issue. When I tabled a subsequent question asking for updated figures, given that this information was now in the public arena I assumed that the Home Office would provide it to me, but it refused again.

I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that it is unacceptable that the Home Office will not provide Members of this House with information that it holds but which it is prepared to release in response to an FOI request. It makes FOIs a more effective way of obtaining information than a parliamentary question.

I have raised my concerns with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, who shares them, and I would appreciate your advice, Mr Speaker, on what else I should do to ensure that the work of Members is not undermined in this way.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. It certainly does seem that the Home Office has been quite unhelpful in responding to his questions on this matter and it is certainly unsatisfactory if a Department provides less information in a response to a parliamentary question from an elected Member of this House than it provides in response to a freedom of information request from an external body. There is a basic issue here of parliamentary self-respect, so we have all got a dog in this race, if I can put it that way.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman has written on this matter to the Procedure Committee, which is exactly the course I would recommend in these circumstances. That Committee plays an important role in monitoring both the quality and timeliness of parliamentary answers. [Interruption.] I am glad to see that that proposition is assented to by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who has himself been a distinguished ornament of that Committee and may be willing to make representations to the Home Secretary on behalf of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). Meanwhile the hon. Gentleman has put his concern on the record and I hope it has been noted on the Treasury Bench and will be conveyed to Home Office Ministers. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.
Sewel Convention

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the emergency debate, and before the three hours allocated starts I state that, subject only to the constraints of time and the willingness of colleagues to help each other, my main ambition is to try to maximise participation.

6.32 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Sewel Convention.

First, if I may, I want to commend all those involved in trying to save the iconic Mac building in the early hours of Saturday morning, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) who attended to make sure that her constituents were safe. I also offer grateful thanks both to the fire service and for the fact that they are all safe from this great tragedy for all of us.

I would like to start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for granting time for this important debate on the issue of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, devolution and the Sewel convention. I should also mention that some members of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs cannot be here today as they are hearing evidence elsewhere; I know that many of them would have wanted to contribute to the debate if they had been here.

I am grateful to you for granting this debate, Mr Speaker, but it is not a substitute for the absolute failure of the UK Government to allow appropriate time for debate on the withdrawal Bill and the failure of the UK Government to protect devolution. Make no mistake: the events of last week demonstrated utter arrogance and the contempt that the UK Government have for the devolved nations. Scotland’s voices were silenced while the Secretary of State for Scotland stood by and did nothing as the UK Government enacted a grab on the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

It is notable that the Secretary of State for Scotland is apparently not leading for the UK Government in this debate. Can the Minister responding to the debate please tell us why the Secretary of State for the Scotland Office is not leading on it when we are discussing Scotland’s devolved institutions? He is the Secretary of State for Scotland: he should face up to the debate on the power grab; he cannot hide from what has been a failure to protect Scotland and to protect devolution. Where is the leadership? He should have insisted on speaking in this debate, which is, after all, a debate about his ability—or, more importantly, lack of ability—to defend the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Is the Secretary of State for Scotland yellow? Will he stand up and defend the interests of Scotland? Perhaps the Secretary of State has not got the gall to do so, particularly when we know that he came to this House and said from the Dispatch Box that amendments would be put and that Members of Parliament in this Chamber would have the ability to discuss what was happening—but none of that ever happened. Why did the Secretary of State promise that we would have that engagement with Members of Parliament and yet fail—fail miserably—to make sure that Scotland’s MPs had the ability to debate this important issue?

When the Secretary of State did bother to show up last week, we saw him come to this Chamber seeking to justify the attack on the Scottish Parliament, claiming that these are not normal times. Of course these are not normal times, because this Government are acting against the interests of the people right across the UK, rather than acting in their best interests.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to say that he was gagged when he put the gag on himself by stomping out of the Chamber.

I wonder what the right hon. Gentleman has to say, however, because we are debating an important point. The architect of the convention, Lord Sewel, has said he does not think this can “fairly be described as a power grab”, because the legislation establishing the Scottish Parliament says “quite explicitly that it doesn’t affect the power of the UK parliament to make laws for Scotland.”

It is absolutely clear that sovereignty rests with the Parliament of the United Kingdom—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just gently say that interventions should be brief?

Ian Blackford: What the hon. Gentleman has identified is that there is no defence of the rights and powers of the Scottish Parliament. What has been proven by the events of the last week is that the Sewel convention is, sadly, unworkable. We have the ridiculous situation that the Conservative Government—in the teeth of opposition from the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, who have said they do not support handing powers over to the Government here in London—have used the majority that they have from England to take powers back from the Scottish Parliament and from the people of Scotland. That is the reality.

The people of these islands have been dragged into the political chaos of Brexit; that is what is not normal. But that is no justification for breaking the convention that states very clearly that the UK Government should not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament. What clearly is not normal is the attack on devolution by the Conservative Government; that is what is not normal. The Scottish Parliament that many fought so long and hard to establish is being emasculated by an anti-Scottish Tory Government here in London.

We used to talk of the settled will of the Scottish people, not the will of the UK Parliament to grab powers from the Scottish Parliament against the will of the Scottish Parliament. The events of last week have shaken the very stability of our devolved settlement, and then the Secretary of State informs us that in his opinion Scotland is not a partner in the UK, but is part of the UK, despite the fact that the Prime Minister had claimed that she wanted: “a future in which Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England continue to flourish side-by-side as equal partners.”—as equal partners. In one sentence, in the mind of the Secretary of State, we have been downgraded from a nation to a region. That is not the equal partnership that the Prime Minister talked about, but a subordinate
relationship that the Secretary of State for Scotland has acquiesced in. He is not so much standing up for Scotland as trampling over our parliamentary settlement.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As Members know, I am one of five former MSPs in this place. The other four are on the Conservative Benches. I served in Holyrood for 12 years, and I am very proud of that. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one way out of this impasse, from which we could learn for the future, would be to put in place some kind of cross-Parliament arbitration system involving Members of this place and MSPs? We have Mr Alex Neil in the Gallery today, joining us from Holyrood. Such a system would be a way of achieving harmony and working together for the good of the people of Scotland, and we should learn from it.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that useful contribution. We have the Joint Ministerial Committee, but let us not forget that it did not meet for six months last year because the Westminster Government would not engage with it. He is quite correct to say that there must be respect for the Parliament, and I would argue that there has to be respect for all the political parties that represent our Parliament and our country.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman refers to the Joint Ministerial Committee, but that is a mechanism for communication between Governments. Surely what is required here is something that I identified 15 years ago—namely, a formal mechanism for communication between the Parliaments. If the Governments cannot be relied on to treat this matter seriously, it is down to the Parliaments to fill that gap.

Ian Blackford: I want to give credit to the other parties in the Scottish Parliament, where there has been a strong level of engagement. We need to improve on that and enhance it. In principle, I am very happy with what the right hon. Gentleman has just said.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his passionate speech. Does he agree that, when the British Government deal with Wales and Scotland in these very sensitive discussions, they would do well to reflect on the wise words of the great French philosopher, Voltaire, who said:

“Injustice in the end produces independence”?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to be reminded of that quote.

I would say to hon. Members on the Government Benches: be careful. This is not about the offence that has been taken by the Scottish National party. Conservative Members need to take on board the fact that they have offended the Scottish Parliament and all the parties in it that I have talked about. All of us on these Benches were back home in Scotland over the weekend, and I can tell the House that Scotland has changed. The strong message that is coming across is that the people who voted for devolution in 1997 can see clearly what is going on. However the Government want to try to define it or spin it, this is an attack on the powers of the Scottish Parliament in the teeth of the opposition of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people. The Conservatives will pay a heavy price, as they have done in the past, if they do not listen to the voices of the Scottish people.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My right hon. Friend will recall that the Conservative party fought tooth and nail against the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament. What we are seeing on the Conservative Benches are apologists—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down. There is too much noise. Mr Bill Grant, you are a most amiable fellow, and it is unusual to see you so animated. It is true that you are beaming, but you and Mr Luke Graham are also in the process of making a considerable cacophony. I think it would be better if you were to calm yourselves for now.

Patricia Gibson: The Conservatives opposed the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament, and we now see the apologists defending the undermining of devolution itself. Does my right hon. Friend agree that they were hostile to the very concept of devolution in the first place?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. They have form, and it goes back over a century.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: If I may, I would like to make some progress. I will allow interventions again later.

If the UK Government have a free hand to bend the rules, and to state when a situation is normal and when it is not, in order to undermine the Sewel convention, we can never, ever protect the powers of our Parliament. Westminster can do as it pleases, and we have to take it. Our Parliament in Scotland, which is supposed to be permanent, can see its powers being changed on a whim by Westminster, which defines these times as not normal. Can the Secretary of State for Scotland not see what is wrong with that? He is here to defend Scotland’s interests, yet he is able to put his hands up and state that the times are not normal, at which point powers over fishing, agriculture, the environment and many other areas defined in the Scotland Act 1998 as being devolved are taken back by Westminster.

The UK Government have got this wrong. Last week, Scotland recognised that a power grab was taking place against our Parliament, at a time when Scottish Members of the UK Parliament were not even allowed to debate the matter here. The devolution settlement was being ripped up with no debate. Where is the democracy in Scotland’s Parliament having its powers stripped and Scotland’s MPs not being given the chance to speak?

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman says that Conservative Members opposed devolution in 1997, but will he take this opportunity to confirm that his own party also opposed it at the time, because its only aim was the separation of Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom? Also, he speaks about a power grab, but can he tell me how many powers the Scottish Parliament currently has, and how many it will have after this Government have enacted the legislation? He knows that it will be considerably more—[Interruption.]

Hon. Members: No answer!
Ian Blackford: No answer? To use a football term, that was miles offside. If the hon. Gentleman looks on Google, he will be able to see what my party did in the 1997 devolution campaign, when we worked collectively with everyone else. I can tell him that I was tramping the streets of Scotland, together with all my colleagues, to ensure that Scotland could get its Parliament—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ian Blackford: The Scottish people voted overwhelmingly for that Parliament, and one of the reasons for that was that we had suffered so badly during the years of the Thatcher and Major Governments, who destroyed communities up and down the land. It is little wonder that the Tories then paid the price and were wiped off the political landscape in Scotland. Today, we see the Scottish Conservatives behaving exactly as they did in the past, and I make this prediction: they will pay the price again, because they have stabbed the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland in the back by taking these powers back.

Scotland is watching, and it is not just the supporters of the SNP who are alarmed. Those who cherish our Parliament are outraged by the attacks on Scotland’s Parliament—[Interruption.] I have to say that the behaviour we are seeing here is illuminating. We should be having a respectful debate, as others have called for—[Interruption.] I am generous in allowing interventions from both sides of the House, but this braying and shouting does nobody any favours. Members on the Government Benches really ought to think about their behaviour and about how it comes across to the people of Scotland. The mood in Scotland has changed. There is a widespread recognition that the Conservatives have reverted to type and that they are attacking devolution—nay, attacking the interests of the people of Scotland.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Last week, when we divided on the Lords amendments, we on this side of the House voted for more powers for the Scottish Parliament. The SNP voted against additional powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Ian Blackford: Dear, oh dear, oh dear. The hon. Gentleman should listen to and watch the reaction in Scotland, because everybody knows that he and his colleagues last week went through the Lobby to vote to strip powers from the Scottish Parliament without a debate in this place. He really ought to be ashamed of himself.

Since the Tories like to talk about referendums, let me remind the House that 74% of those who voted in our referendum in 1997 voted for a Scottish Parliament—our Parliament—and it belongs to all of us. We should not forget that the Tories opposed devolution from the introduction of the home rule Bill in this Parliament in 1913 right up to 1997 and that the Tories have form in standing up against the Scottish Parliament. The remark from the Secretary of State for Scotland that we are not a partner within the UK is simply confirmation of how he sees Scotland’s place. It is little wonder that he fails to stand up for Scotland as a country and for our Parliament. He sees us as subservient. That is the nub of the problem and that is why the Secretary of State for Scotland needs to go. The Secretary of State is simply unfit for the office that he holds. He cannot fight Scotland’s corner because he will not fight Scotland’s corner.

By ignoring the Scottish Parliament during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the UK Government have risked the security of the devolution settlement. This is an extremely serious development. Section 28(7) of the Scotland Act 1998 confirms that Westminster retains its unlimited sovereignty. The devolution settlement provides through the Sewel convention that the legislative power will not be used if there is disagreement and the devolved legislatures do not give consent. There has been no agreement. The Scottish Parliament voted by 93 votes to 30 not to consent to the EU withdrawal Bill. Why did the Secretary of State for Scotland not stand up for the Scottish Parliament? Why does he not get up now and tell us that he will stand up for the rights of the Scottish Parliament? Grow some backbone and stand up for Scotland.

The UK Government’s website states:

“The main role of the Scottish Secretary is to promote and protect the devolution settlement.”

My goodness, he has been found wanting on that one. While the Secretary of State has not done very well at defending devolution, he is the one who wants to kick the legs away from the agreed settlement. What a disgrace. He has been a dismal failure on living up to the definition, which the Government have stated, to protect devolution. The Secretary of State has ambushed devolution. At every turn, he has failed to defend the devolution settlement. Where are the amendments to protect our interests that he promised? He should have told the UK Government that there must be protected time to debate the effect of the withdrawal Bill on Scotland’s position, but he failed again. The Secretary of State for Scotland has no credibility. There is no coming back from this. He must resign or the Prime Minister must sack him.

The EU withdrawal Bill is the biggest attack on devolution that we have ever witnessed. The UK Government’s power grab aims to keep Scotland’s powers in London, not in Scotland. As currently drafted, the legislation would keep devolved powers coming back from Brussels here in London—[Interruption.] It is shocking—24 powers in devolved areas, such as fishing, agriculture, the environment and food labelling. That is an absolute scandal.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman comment on the remarks of his party colleague, Jim Sillars, who lays the blame at Nicola Sturgeon’s feet for “displays of foolish hostility”? Is that not exactly what the right hon. Gentleman is doing? Does he not respect the fact that there are two Governments in Scotland and that the Scottish people elected two Governments? He must show that some respect.

Ian Blackford: I think some of the hon. Gentlemen on the Government Benches should be auditioning for comedy hour. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that the Conservatives have lost every single election in Scotland since 1955, but they want to put a veto on the Scottish Parliament and the people of our country. That is the reality.

Powers must be in Scotland’s hands, and it is not just the SNP saying it. Every party except for the Conservatives has stood up to defend Scotland’s Parliament. A recent
survey by 38 Degrees showed that—[Interruption.] My goodness, the contempt. 38 Degrees does a valuable job of ensuring that our constituents keep us informed of what is important to them, but we get mocking contempt from the Conservatives. They should keep it going, because people in Scotland are watching their behaviour. A recent survey by 38 Degrees showed that 62% of Scots agree and want to see responsibilities over devolved areas currently held by Europe transferred straight to the Scottish Parliament.

Legal experts such as Professor Rick Rawlins have also criticised the EU withdrawal legislation for riding roughshod over the devolution settlement. He said:

“The sooner clause 11 of the Withdrawal Bill is cast aside, the better. Constitutionally maladroit, it warps the dialogue about the role and place of the domestic market concept post-Brexit.”

John Downie at the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations has also advocated for powers to return to Scotland, not London. He said:

“We have consistently pushed to enhance the powers of devolved parliaments—where it makes sense to do so—and believe more devolved powers would better enable Scottish and Welsh Ministers to react to unique regional challenges and shape tailored solutions... We feel the transfer of powers to the devolved administrations would make it easier for the sector to influence their use in a positive way.”

The Scottish Trades Union Congress leader Grahame Smith also warned:

“The UK Government must accept the legitimacy of devolved institutions and realise that proposals which create a constitutional outrage would make it easier for the sector to influence their use in a positive way.”

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John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Tory Government’s re-reservation of powers and the rest of their preferred post-Brexit constitutional arrangements effectively strip decisions about fracking from the Scottish Government? If decisions about the future of fracking in Scotland are to be made in Whitehall, does he agree that the Secretary of State for Scotland’s office has been permanently undermined, no matter who occupies it?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct and makes a valuable point. We must be careful about the threats to Scotland from fracking. Scotland is an energy-rich country, with a wide range of energy sources, and we lead the world in renewables. However, we have a Government in London who want to bash ahead and risk ruining Scotland’s environment. We cannot stand aside and allow that to happen.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman correctly points to 24 powers, but will he explain which of those creates a constitutional outrage? Assuming that the answer is “some”, why then did his colleagues in the Scottish Government agree back in December that each and every one of those 24 should be subject to a UK-wide framework?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): You’re supposed to be good!

Ian Blackford: “You’re supposed to be good”? You have got to be kidding. May I respectfully suggest that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) reads the Scotland Act 1998 because—[Interruption.] I can see Conservative Members shaking their heads, but this is the nub of the problem. Devolution and the Scottish Parliament are defined by that legislation, and that legislation defines what is devolved and what is reserved. The simple fact is that each of those 24 areas is devolved, and the powers belong in the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government have said repeatedly that they want to reach agreement with the UK Government, but that agreement must be based on mutual respect. We will not unreasonably withhold consent on setting up framework agreements, but it has to be done on the basis of the consent of the Scottish Government and the consent of the Scottish Parliament.

I cannot, for the life of me, understand why this is such a difficult concept to grab. I am somewhat surprised and disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. Last week, Scotland’s voices were silenced and ignored.

Simon Hoare: Because you walked out.

Ian Blackford: Is that a fact? What happened on Tuesday night, and it is a matter of record—it can be looked up in Hansard—is that the hon. Gentleman went through the Lobby to strip the Scottish Parliament of powers, and not a single Scottish MP was allowed to debate the issue. That is the fundamental point.

The behaviour of the UK Government is disgraceful. The Conservatives really think they can do whatever they want with Scotland and get away with it—it is back to the days of the poll tax under Thatcher. The very fact they railroaded this legislation through with no time for speeches from anyone other than the UK Government Minister shows utter contempt for Scottish democracy.

I regret that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not down to speak tonight, and I will give him another opportunity. Stand up and defend the indefensible. He cannot. He is sitting there and playing with his iPhone. Playing with his iPhone and stabbing the Scottish Parliament in the back—that is the reality. Come on, up you get. Come on, speak up.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a sort of rhetorical device, but it is up to the Secretary of State if he wishes to intervene. One cannot have people intervening against their will.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The tone of this speech—I suppose it can be called that—by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is not worthy of a response. He calls for respect but focuses entirely on the personal in his comments. This may be a performance for his colleagues, it may be a performance for his core voters, but it does not impress Scotland.

Ian Blackford: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what does not impress Scotland: a Secretary of State for Scotland who does not defend our Parliament. He should do the decent thing, the honourable thing, and resign, and he should do it now.

SNP Minister Mike Russell said last week that it had been a “dark day for devolution.” Despite countless representations from the Scottish Government seeking to work with the UK Government to protect our interests, the intransigence of the Tory party has seen our concerns, our mitigations and our solutions bluntly disregarded and disrespected—that is the reality.
Although the UK Government accept that clause 15 of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill requires the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament, they decided to ignore Scotland’s democratic wishes when consent was not given. Last week we saw the Secretary of State for Scotland come crawling to the Chamber to explain the UK Government’s position after the SNP had exposed the Tory power grab but, rather than reassure the people of Scotland that the UK Government—

Colin Clark: Painful.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely, it is painful. It is painful that the people of Scotland are seeing their powers taken back from them.

Rather than reassure the people of Scotland that the UK Government are committed to protecting our devolution settlement, the Scottish Secretary’s statement effectively turned Sewel on its head by saying that if there is disagreement, such as no consent on a legislative consent motion, the UK Government can proceed to legislate. That is cause for huge concern, and it is a pity he is clearly not that concerned, or he would have made sure to respond to this important debate.

Under the constitutional rules, this Government should not proceed without the Scottish Parliament’s consent. By constitutional convention and invariable practice since 1999, the Bill should not complete its Westminster stages in its current form without that consent. Despite the murmurings of the current Secretary of State, the Scotland Office stated back in 2005 that the UK Government “considers that the continuation of the Convention is vital to the success of devolution.”

What has changed? The only thing that has changed is that the Scottish Parliament has not given its consent and the UK Government, showing utter disrespect, have decided to proceed.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): We all heard the Secretary of State’s statement to the House on Thursday morning. Can the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) give a commitment on behalf of the Scottish Government, and indeed on behalf of his party, that, if the Secretary of State were to convene cross-party talks, his party would take part?

Ian Blackford: Yes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. One of the things I would say to him, and to the Government, is that I do not believe it is in anybody’s interest not to have an agreement on this. We all have a responsibility to defend the powers and interests of the Scottish Parliament. I implore the Secretary of State to get back round the table. Let us resolve this issue. I do not want us to be in a situation where the Government in London take back responsibility for our powers, and they really must listen to the voices coming from around this Chamber and, indeed, from around Scotland.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, with which I am happy to associate myself. I also know from speaking to constituents at the weekend that many of them will associate themselves with these points. The last time I saw such outrage from my constituents was during the opposition to the Iraq war and to the poll tax. Does he agree that Scotland has now reached a tipping point as a result of the actions of this Government?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is correct, and that is borne out by my own experiences over the past few days. We have only to look at the increased membership of the Scottish National party. There are people coming to the SNP who have not supported the SNP previously, and who have not supported Scottish independence, but who are simply appalled that there is an attack on the Scottish Parliament and on devolution.

I simply say to the Secretary of State: by all means, carry on down this road, because the people of Scotland will ultimately have to decide where their future lies. What he is doing, as he continues down this road, is helping to strengthen the case for Scottish independence. I suppose we should be grateful for that.

Last week the UK Government had a duty to amend the EU (Withdrawal) Bill to respect the will of the Scottish Parliament, and they failed to do so. Although SNP MPs sought to be constructive with our amendments, we were shut out of the debate while the Tories ploughed ahead without any consideration of our proposed solution. The complete contempt for the people of Scotland shown by the Tory Government is sickening. Not only were our amendments ignored, the entire debate on devolution was allocated less than 20 minutes of discussion, with no Scottish MP allowed to speak up for their constituents. Instead, the UK Government Minister ate up all the time for himself.

The Scottish Tories said that they would come here to stand up for Scotland. Well, what did they do? They trooped through the Lobby to take away Scotland’s powers—Theresa May’s poodles, whipped to vote against Scotland’s interests. Scotland was aghast. The actions of the UK Government have been an affront to democracy.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate and on his fantastic speech. In the Scottish Parliament, the Labour party in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, the SNP and the Scottish Greens are on one side and the Tories are on the other. On this issue, it has become Scotland versus the Tories.

Ian Blackford: That reminds me of the line said to the woman watching her son on parade: “They’re all out of step, apart from your Johnny.” In this case, Johnny is the Scottish Tories.

When I confronted the Prime Minister on the shambolic handling of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill by her Government, we were given more bluff and bluster. It is not good enough. Over the past few days, my party colleagues and I have been criticised in this place for standing up to the Prime Minister, for making our voices heard and for standing up for the people of Scotland. I put the Prime Minister on notice that SNP MPs will not stand by while her Government seek to rip up the rulebook. This Government have an opportunity to do the right thing.

With the clock ticking, we have only days left in which to save Scotland’s devolved settlement. The solution I put to the Prime Minister last week is still on the table, which is that she should act immediately to bring forward emergency legislation to remove clause 15 and schedule 3, in line with the Scottish Parliament vote. That is the
only way that this Government can undo the damage they have caused and the only way the Tories can show the people of Scotland that their Scottish Parliament’s rights are recognised and respected. That is the only way we can save devolution in Scotland.

The Scottish Parliament has passed a continuity Bill to protect its powers. Unbelievably, the Scottish Parliament is being taken to the Supreme Court by the UK Government over the matter. They should immediately withdraw this threat over the Scottish Parliament—stop attacking our Parliament and start to show the Scottish Parliament some respect. The days of a UK Tory Government threatening Scotland must end. It is little wonder that the Tories once again are seen as anti-Scottish.

Let me put all of this in an historical context. The campaign to establish the Scottish Parliament has been a long one. The Scottish Home Rule Association was established way back in 1894. There was a Scottish Government Bill that passed its Second Reading in 1913 and would have established a Scottish Parliament with greater powers than the one we have today. Scotland voted in a referendum for a Scottish Parliament in 1979, but the incoming Tory Government refused to deliver the Scottish Parliament that Scotland had voted for. Right through the 1980s and 1990s the demands for a Scottish Parliament grew. These growing calls were ignored by the Conservatives until they were swept out of office. In 1998, the Scotland Act establishing a Scottish Parliament was passed, in the teeth of opposition from the Conservatives. Majority Scottish opinion demanded a Parliament; it was, as was stated, the settled will of the Scottish people. When Winnie Ewing rose to address the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 she said:

“the Scottish Parliament, which adjourned on March 25, 1707, is hereby reconvened.”—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 12 May 1999.]

That Parliament, which we all on these Benches take pride in, had its powers defined in the Scotland Act. Schedule 5 of the Act defines what areas are reserved. The UK Government also accept:

“The act does not specify which matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, rather it specifies those matters that are reserved to the UK Parliament. Those matters not reserved by the Scotland Act are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has primary legislative powers, ie the power to pass acts.”

That is clear cut and it is why we cannot allow the Conservative Government to take back responsibility over 24 matters which, by the Scotland Act, are devolved. It is wrong and we will do everything in our power to stop it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a stunning speech. Does he agree that, as the suffragettes said, we shall be judged

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and she is absolutely correct in what she says. There is a wonderful book called “The Scottish Secretaries”, which talks about some of the great and not so great Scottish Secretaries. Let us reflect on people such as Tom Johnston, who did so much to transform Scottish society, and then look at the current Secretary of State, who fails to stand up for Scotland and sees our powers taken back. [Interruption.] Someone may want to stand up to tell me what is personal in that. I am focusing on the fundamentals: his party is working against the interests of the Scottish people and the Scottish Parliament, and is “taking back control”.

It is therefore simple: Westminster, without consent, is changing the devolution settlement and is prepared to undermine the Scotland Act. None of us can stand back and allow this to happen—it is a point of principle. Westminster should not have a veto on the Scottish Parliament. It is pretty rich that last week we heard accusations that Scotland was seeking a veto over Westminster—the Secretary of State has said that repeatedly. Let me be clear: that is not the case. All we are seeking to do is to ensure that the powers in the Scotland Act are defended, not dismantled.

We have our own constitutional history in the case of MacCormick v. the Lord Advocate in 1953. When Lord Cooper gave his decision, he said:

“The principle of unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctly English principle which has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law.”

That is to say: in Scotland, the people are sovereign. Westminster must respect the will of the Scottish Parliament, through its Members having been elected by the people of Scotland.

I should remind the UK Government that they have lost every single election in Scotland since 1955, and it is hardly surprising. The Conservatives are isolated in the Scottish Parliament in not standing up to defend our devolved rights. This is not about the SNP; it is about devolved rights. This is not about the SNP; it is about the settled will of the Scottish people and of the Scottish Parliament. History will judge all of us on our actions at this critical and challenging time. Therefore I say to every Scottish MP in this place: do not fall on the wrong side. I say to the Secretary of State: stop hiding out, and instead stand with us, stand up for Scotland’s Parliament and stop the power grab, or go down as the Secretary of State who allowed our Scotland’s Parliament to have its powers reduced. History will remember this defining moment when this Parliament chose to reject devolution—when the Tories chose to end almost 10 years of constitutional convention, only to tell the people of Scotland that their voices will be silenced. But I say again that there is a choice before the UK Government: act now to bring in emergency legislation to recognise the Scottish Parliament and to protect our devolved settlement. Anything less risks constitutional crisis. We are days away, the clock is ticking and the Government must act. I urge them to choose to be on the right side of history, do the right thing by the people of Scotland, and bring forward emergency legislation immediately to delete clause 15 and schedule 3, in order to protect Scottish devolution and our Scottish Parliament.

In closing, I recall the powerful and pertinent words of Charles Stewart Parnell:

“No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country, ‘Thus far shalt thou go and no further.’”

7.17 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I share the disappointment that has been expressed in the
Chamber today that we were not given the opportunity to discuss these very important issues during last week’s debate. However, that is where my agreement with the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) ends. It is worthwhile highlighting why we did not have the time to debate these matters last week: 11 times last Tuesday the Labour party caused this House to divide. Labour Members knew exactly what the consequences would be in terms of timings, but they persisted and sacrificed the time available for Members to contribute to the debate. So I am delighted that we have the opportunity to discuss the ramifications of clause 15 today.

Once we leave the European Union, the Scottish Parliament will be even more powerful than it is just now—that is a fact. Every one of the powers being repatriated from Brussels after Brexit is already with Holyrood at implementation level, no power that currently resides there is being removed. We could be having a debate about how those powers could be used to improve the lives of our fellow Scots, but instead, unsurprisingly, we are doing what the SNP loves best and talking about process. Like my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, I regret that the Scottish Government were not able to agree a deal with the UK Government on the transfer of powers, but I have to be honest and say that I was not surprised. It really is questionable whether Nicola Sturgeon was ever going to do a deal in the first place. Let us not forget that within hours of the EU referendum result being declared two years ago, she summoned the media to Bute House and instructed her officials to start drawing up the necessary legislation for a second independence referendum. She knew fine well that a deal with the UK Government would have been detrimental to her plans for a re-run of 2014.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree with Jim Sillars, the former deputy leader of the Scottish National party, who said:

“Let me be blunt: the stand-off between Holyrood and Westminster is primarily the fault of Nicola Sturgeon”?

Mr Jack: Obviously, I do agree with that, and I also agree with Jim Sillars—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. People were talking about mutual respect, so may I explain to the House that it is discourteous for side conversations between Members to take place when another Member has the floor? The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has just intervened, and he should then alert himself to the response to his intervention, rather than engaging in a squabble with the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

Mr Jack: I also agree with Jim Sillars that it is ironic that Nicola Sturgeon wants to take powers from the Prime Minister and return them to Mr Juncker, but there we are.

Let me go back to the point I was making about a deal with the UK Government being detrimental to the planned re-run of a divisive referendum. Despite the best intentions of her Brexit Minister, who I believe wanted to do a deal, the First Minister would never have agreed to anything that he went back with. For the SNP, it is all about grievance and division with Westminster. The people of Scotland are rightly sick of it.

Once we leave the European Union, it is vital that the integrity of the unified internal market of the United Kingdom is upheld. It is of benefit to everyone, not least Scotland, where our trade with the rest of the UK is worth four times more than our trade with the EU. To maintain that internal market, we need to agree common frameworks—something on which even the SNP agrees. Such frameworks will provide certainty to businesses in our home nations that there will be no barriers to doing trade within the UK.

Whether they are in areas such as agricultural support, animal welfare, environmental standards, food labelling, or public procurement, common frameworks are required to ensure fairness throughout the UK, to maintain standards, and to ensure co-operation between the four home nations. As we leave the EU and become a global free-trading nation again, common frameworks will ensure that the whole UK is able to benefit from the trade deals that will be signed with countries around the globe. Without those frameworks, we could end up with different regulatory systems throughout the UK, which could potentially make it harder for us to sign comprehensive free trade deals.

One would think that all that makes complete sense, but it was not enough for the Scottish Government. In effect, they wanted a veto over the powers in the frameworks, which would, it is important to bear in mind, also affect the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To my mind, the UK Government were right not to give in to that demand. Is it not just a bit suspicious that a Unionist Government in Wales were able to sign up to the final deal, but a nationalist Government in Scotland were not? I do not think it will have escaped the people of Scotland’s notice that Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP have used this process to further their desire to take the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To do that effectively, they wanted a veto over the powers in the frameworks, which would, it is important to bear in mind, also affect the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To my mind, the UK Government were right not to give in to that demand. Is it not just a bit suspicious that a Unionist Government in Wales were able to sign up to the final deal, but a nationalist Government in Scotland were not? I do not think it will have escaped the people of Scotland’s notice that Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP have used this process to further their desire to take the people of Scotland do not want.

If it could, the SNP would take us straight back into the European Union, sign us back up to the hated common fisheries policy and, ironically, hand the powers that are so contentious to them straight back to Brussels. However, we will not let that happen, which is why the Government are respecting the democratic will of the British people to leave the European Union.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to be involved in this important debate and to follow the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), although I take umbrage at his claiming in opening his speech that this debacle, which has actually been made by his own Government, is somehow the fault of democratically elected politicians going through the Lobby to vote for Lords amendments to a major piece of legislation. That is our democratic right. I am sure that many of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents wrote to him last week to ask him to support the 15 amendments that came back from the other place, in the same way that many of my constituents wrote to me. That is what we committed to do and it is certainly what we did last week.

The blame for the House having only 19 minutes to deal with the devolution issues lies squarely with the Government’s programme managers—the Leader of
the House and the usual channels—who decided to make it a six-hour debate, with a knife at three hours, so that the second three hours would be taken into by votes. They could have taken a completely different approach to the programme motion and allowed the votes to happen and then another three-hour debate after that. This travesty and devastation, and the grievance that has been given to certain parties in the House, is of the Government’s own making.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; the answer did lie in the timetable. The Government could have protected the time for debating that string of amendments but they chose not to. Does he agree that, especially considering the nature of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, to suggest that this House should somehow have to choose between debating the amendments from the other place and voting on them is quite ridiculous?

Ian Murray: It is quite ridiculous, and I cannot help but feel that the programme motion was put in place for that very purpose. The Government would have known that the House would divide on the vast majority of those amendments, such that that three-hour knife would, by the nature of the process of amendments coming back from the other place in ping-pong, reduce the time available for debate.

I shall come to why it affects the Sewel convention, but the reason why everyone is so frustrated and angry about the process is that the Secretary of State—I will not get into the personal politics; I disagree with his points of view fundamentally, but he has always dealt with me fairly, and I think he will perhaps look back and regret some of the Government’s actions in this process—promised at the Dispatch Box, on several occasions, that this elected House would get to debate the amendments on devolution that were being put to the other place. He promised that the amendments would come in Committee, and they did not, and that they would come on Report, and they did not. His own Back Bencher, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who is in his place, said that he would reluctantly back the Government’s position on the Opposition amendments, after he was given assurances by his own Front Benchers that the amendments would come on Report.

The very fact that the amendments have been tabled in the other place, meaning that the elected House has been unable to debate them or, indeed, have any kind of say in them, has left us with a grievance to exploit, somehow to dispute that? Has he read the amendment and is he seriously disputing that?

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman misinterprets the Labour party position; in fact, misinformation is the SNP’s role in this debate. I am clear about our position. The amendment tabled in the House of Lords would get us to around 80% of where we would like to be. The old clause 11 was deficient, as everyone in this House—including the Secretary of State himself and the Minister for the Cabinet Office—has said. There has been a process of negotiation, and in such a process one cannot always get what one wants. I would have liked the Government to go much further, but on the basis that the amendment was in my view 80% acceptable, it did not seem right to vote for it or to vote against it. That is a principled position to take. I say to the hon. Gentleman that it is completely and utterly fundamentally disingenuous to claim that powers are being taken back from the Scottish Parliament. It is equally fundamentally disingenuous to say that Brexit will be a powers bonanza. Both positions are wrong. The powers of the Scottish Parliament will not increase by one iota as a result of this process, and the number of powers that will be taken from the Scottish Parliament as part of this process is zero. Because the Conservatives and the SNP have in themselves to continue to fight with each other because it is politically expedient for them to do so, all these kinds of arguments and the pragmatic approach to this process are lost.

Ian Murray: I will give way to the hon. and learned Lady, my constituency neighbour, if she wants to dispel the myth and agree that the Scottish Parliament will receive no fewer powers than it has and will have no powers taken from it as part of this process.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously disputing the fact that, as a result of the amendments passed last week, 24 powers will be taken back to this Parliament, or have he never read the amendment? For up to seven years and that, at any time during that seven years, the UK Government can alter them as they see fit? Has he read the amendment and is he seriously disputing that?

Ian Murray: The hon. and learned Lady’s question touches on the bit of the amendment from the House of Lords that we disputed. In fact, if she looks at our Front-Bench amendment in this place—[Interruption.] I do not understand why the behaviour of the Scottish National party has to be so hostile when I am actually on its side for the vast majority of this issue. There is no respect in this Chamber for people who want to make their points.

I agree 80% with the amendment that came back from the House of Lords. This is the bit that I do not agree with. In fact, the shadow Secretary of State put forward an amendment in lieu of the Lords amendments that stated the very fact that this was where the contention lay with the sunset clauses. I have the 24 areas of legislation in front of me, and I would like to say to the people of Scotland who are perhaps watching this debate that we do need UK-wide legislative frameworks on some of these matters, because it is important for the operation of Scotland, the UK Government and the UK economy. For example, let us look at environmental quality and standards in chemicals. Nobody could possibly suggest that, in the pragmatic world in which we live, we
do not need both Governments to come together and propose a proper UK framework for that kind of issue. That is just one of the 24 issues—there are 153 issues—that has come up in this particular process.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will not give way again to the hon. and learned Lady, because others wish to speak. She will get her opportunity to speak in this debate.

We must take the politics and the heat out of this debate. During the statement last Thursday, I asked the Secretary of State whether there was any possibility of people continuing to talk on this matter. He said that he was willing to talk, but that the Scottish Government will not move from their position. In reply to my intervention a few moments ago, the leader of the SNP said that the Scottish Government, in his view, would be willing to talk. When can we possibly get both Governments around the table to try to flesh some of this out? The nub of the problem—one of a number—is that the Joint Ministerial Committee does not meet regularly enough. As was said by Lord McConnell, who set up this particular process, it should have been scrapped a long time ago. During the passage of the Scotland Bill in 2015 in this Chamber—all the SNP Members were here—I put forward amendments from that Dispatch Box to put the JMC on a statutory footing to allow minutes and agendas to be published publicly, so we did not get into this situation of “he said, she said” and the whole matter becomes a political football.

When the Minister gets to the Dispatch Box, I urge him to give a clear commitment that every single piece of communication that has happened in the JMC with regards to the devolution amendments is published. I shall tell him why he should do that. While this whole process is secret and while people are kept in the dark about who said what and who agreed to what, all we get is: this is a power grab, or this is a powers bonanza. The people of Scotland then have to decide which one is the most appropriate. As the compromise was made, I want to know, and the people of Scotland want to know, how far apart the two sides are. Is it the case that it is two minor things on which the Scottish Government are deliberately withholding consent, because it is not in their interest to give consent? I agree with the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) that the Scottish Government never intended to give consent, even if they got 100% of what they wanted. I do not know how we can get to a place whereby the people of Scotland can be confident, and the people of Scotland can be confident, that both Governments can work together. It is in both Governments’ interests to fight over these particular issues, because they cannot resolve some of the major problems with regards to leaving the European Union. Therefore, a fight between flags, between the Conservatives and the Scottish National party, suits both political agendas down to the ground while every other issue ends up being on the agenda.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) rose—

Ian Murray: I will not give way, because we will run out of time. I would hate it if the hon. Gentleman had to walk out because he was not able to get his say in this particular debate.

I will make two other brief points. I think that we are all in the same place in this Chamber in terms of what we want to try to achieve. If we leave the European Union, we want to be able to have a legislative framework in front of us that works for the things that we need it to work for. It is quite clear from the people who speak to me that we cannot have different frameworks with regards to the movement of animals across the UK, because we need the UK internal market to work. We cannot have different food labelling or we will have a situation like I have in my constituency where we have a wonderful Mexican deli which imports all this stuff from Mexico but has to relabel it with all the different labels. We could not possibly have that situation, so we do need some UK-wide frameworks that work and operate for the UK internal market. It is not in the SNP’s interests to make that work, because it wants out of the UK internal market. That is part of the problem that we have here with the politics. It comes down to the nub of the issue, which is: are the UK Government right on this particular issue? I do not think they are. They could have gone much further and they have made a hash of it and they are architects of their own misfortune. But are the SNP Scottish Government willing to move to be able to get an agreement on this? I think the answer to that is no. In the absence of two parties that are willing to talk to each other or willing to compromise, where does it leave us in terms of the overall devolution settlement?

I will finish on this. When he set up the Sewel convention, Lord Sewel said quite clearly that it should not be used for major policy issues on which there is a major political disagreement, and we are seeing that play out now. I do not know how we can get to a place whereby the Scottish Government can give this a legislative consent motion. I suspect that if clause 15 and schedule 3 were deleted from the amended Bill, they would still not give the legislative consent motion because it is not in their interests to do so. In the absence of two Governments willing to work together, how do we get to a position where this Bill can be passed and the Scottish Government can say that they will give it legislative consent? This is
no power grab and it is no powers bonanza. Both Governments should tone down the rhetoric, get back round the table and think seriously about making sure that the JMC operates properly in the future and that it is transparent about its minutes and agendas.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. With immediate effect, a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches now applies because I am keen to accommodate the maximum number of colleagues.

7.38 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) who said so many things with which I agreed and so many things that made great sense.

We are here discussing the Sewel convention because of Brexit and because of the SNP’s aim of separation. In 2016, the EU referendum was not a Scottish vote any more than it was a Yorkshire vote or a London vote; it was a UK vote. To respect the UK result, we must deliver the will of the people. The 2014 independence referendum makes Scotland democratically, beyond doubt, a vital part of the UK. We hear cries of “Scotland’s watching”. Yes, the people are watching. They are watching the SNP not respecting the independence referendum. They are watching the SNP not respecting the independence referendum. The SNP is acting as a fifth column. Industry can expect no power grab. What part of no does the hon. Gentleman not understand?

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about this democracy and compares the EU with the UK, which I find peculiar. Can he tell me of any other EU member state that is a democracy, where a party has lost an election 21 times in a row, but finds itself in power?

Colin Clark: I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is the United Kingdom. We had an independence referendum. He and I are part of the United Kingdom. I want to protect the Union; he wants separation from it. Jim Sillars also said:

“I cannot remember one hostile speech that could be construed as an outright attempt to trash Scotland’s constitutional position.”

That is interesting, given that he is from the SNP. So this is not an attack on devolution and it is not a power grab.

What I really wanted to come on to is that language such as “Martini strategy” and “hit and run” radicalises those supporters to ignite the democratic process, undermines the rule of law and weakens Holyrood’s role. Frankly, it can endanger politicians, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned earlier.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): On the hon. Gentleman’s comment about undermining democracy, the point has been made many times in this House that the parties in the Scottish Parliament have voted time and again to ensure that our powers were retained. Four out of five parties supported that, voting no to a power grab. What part of no does the hon. Gentleman not understand?

Colin Clark: In the 2014 independence referendum, Scotland clearly said no. My predecessor, Alex Salmond, said that the referendum was a “once in a generation” event, and here we are. Which part of no do we not understand? I think that the problem clearly lies with the SNP.

Are we defending the integrity of the UK and protecting the devolution settlement? Yes we are, because the Scots want their two Governments to work together. Using guerrilla tactics to undermine this place, the democratic norms and the very basis of our liberal democracy, is deeply disappointing. Taking the advice of my predecessor, Alex Salmond, this may rally the SNP hardcore, but it will alienate the law-abiding, taxpaying Scots who play by the rules. We are here as democrats. We should not let our constituents down.
Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I rise as one of those law-abiding, taxpaying Scots that the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) so clearly has such disdain for.

Regardless of what Government Members would have us believe, it is now clear to everyone that, following last week’s unprecedented power grab on the Scottish Parliament and its powers, the Conservative party and this Government have finally abandoned any pretense of having even the remotest commitment to devolution. That a power grab of this scale can be enacted by one Parliament over another demonstrates once and for all that the Tories have not the slightest interest in respecting the fundamental principles of devolution.

The contemptuous way in which Scottish democracy was dismissed by this place last week, with a 15-minute lecture from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), was simply further proof that Scotland has no future in this United Kingdom and that the sooner we are free from it, the better. The Tories’ disgraceful disdain for the will of the Scottish people as expressed by the democratically elected Members of the Scottish Parliament shows the Tories in their true colours—anti-democratic, narrow-minded, backward-looking and insular. Let us never forget that these are people who, as devout British nationalists, were vehemently opposed to the creation of a Scottish Parliament from the outset.

For a century or more, the official Conservative party position was to oppose even the slightest devolution of political power from London to Scotland. Only when confronted with overwhelming public opinion, did the Conservatives—publicly, at least—embrace the idea of a devolved Parliament in Edinburgh. They may have changed their tune but, like the leopard, they have not changed their spots, so it should not come as a surprise to anyone that, at the first opportunity, they are using Brexit as an excuse to roll back on the devolution settlement—a settlement that they never believed in—to try to claw back to London as many of the powers and competencies of the Scottish Parliament as possible.

Last week, the Secretary of State made the excuse of these not being “normal times”, as if these circumstances somehow justified him carrying out this power grab. What he of course failed to mention was that the UK Government’s own lawyers, when they recently went to the Supreme Court, said:

“Whether circumstances are ‘normal’ is a quintessential matter of political judgment for the Westminster Parliament.”

There we have it. The UK Government will decide what is and is not normal. They alone will decide what powers the Scottish Parliament has and what powers will be restricted for up to seven years, without that Parliament’s consent. Is there anyone so naïve that they really believe that, having grabbed those powers for themselves, the UK Government will return them to Scotland after seven years? Not a chance.

No one should be in any doubt what is at stake here. Once the precedent is established that Westminster can overrule a majority vote in the Scottish Parliament whenever there is disagreement, a standard will have been set and the ground rules will have been established. It is my genuine fear that if we allow this to happen, it will be used by the Tories as a pretext to seize powers again and again and again, whenever it suits them. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, this is not about the SNP versus the Tory Government, because the SNP, the Labour party, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament all recognised that what the Tories were planning was nothing less than a power grab—an outrageous attack on the democratically elected Parliament of Scotland. Let me be clear: this is Scotland against the Tories. If that does nothing else, it should send a message to Downing Street and Dover House that their Tory power grab on our Parliament will not be tolerated by the people of Scotland.

Let no one in this House be in any doubt that the people of Scotland are furious at what is taking place. We have heard much about how these 87 powers are to be returned directly to Holyrood, and only 24 are to be appropriated by Westminster. To me, that is akin to a burglar being caught breaking into someone’s house and defending himself by saying, “You should be grateful that I only nicked your telly.” It is an absolute nonsense of an argument. A power grab is a power grab is a power grab—an outrageous attack on the democratically elected Parliament of Scotland. The SNP versus the Tory Government. Let me be clear: this is Scotland against the Tories. If that does nothing else, it should send a message to Downing Street and Dover House that their Tory power grab on our Parliament will not be tolerated by the people of Scotland.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Before I get on to my speech, I want to say that the language used in this debate about Scotland versus the Tories and our being anti-Scottish does not help to heal the divisions that we have in Scotland. It is because of that kind of rhetoric that my office regularly gets targeted by vandals. Only a couple of weeks ago, someone who is not a constituent of mine was arrested for intimidating my staff. I would really urge Opposition Members to mind their language.

The SNP’s fundamental argument is based on an untruth that there is a power grab. Let us be absolutely clear that none of these powers is currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament or by the UK Parliament. These powers are exercised by the European Union since we entered the European Union. The SNP claim is nothing more than an untruth that there is a power grab. Let us be absolutely clear that none of these powers is currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament or by the UK Parliament. These powers are exercised by the European Union since we entered the European Union. The only reason the Scottish Parliament will be receiving any additional powers is that we are leaving the European Union, and that is something that the SNP has vehemently opposed to the point that it is threatening another referendum in order to send those powers back. The SNP does not want these powers—not a single one of them—and it is doing everything imaginable to keep them in Brussels.

Let us look at the reality of what we are actually dealing with, which is a massive SNP power giveaway to Brussels. SNP Members argue that these new Brexit powers constitute a power grab, but we know that they will not let facts get in the way of great political rhetoric, or of Twitter. I was amazed that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was able to tweet while speaking—a great gift that I wish I could also adopt. There is no power grab, and that is why the SNP cannot answer the simplest of questions: which power that the Scottish Parliament currently exercises will it have taken away? The answer is none. In fact, as clause 15 of the withdrawal Bill makes clear, these powers are returning from Brussels and will pass by default to Holyrood, as they will to Cardiff Bay and...
Stornont. In a number of areas, with the agreement of the Scottish Government, there may—“may” is the operative word—temporarily be freezes of existing frameworks as they are handed down from Brussels, so that both Governments work together on common wide frameworks to ensure short-term stability. The UK Government agreed to the SNP Government’s request for a sunset clause, meaning that any of those freezes will be strictly temporary and last for five years maximum before the area is devolved. This will not be a permanent part of the devolution settlement.

To be crystal clear, over 80 new powers will go immediately to Holyrood, while in 24 areas the UK Government will maintain the existing EU arrangements protecting the integrity of the UK internal market. It is due to the UK Government flipping clause 11 into clause 15 and making significant concessions that the Welsh Labour Government were able to sign up to the deal offered as being fair, respecting devolution, and protecting the UK internal market. The deal was reasonable and met the SNP’s own test. We understand that Mike Russell was ready to sign up but was overruled by Nicola Sturgeon, because she wants to put the interests of the nationalists ahead of the interests of the nation.

The SNP has seized on the failure to reach agreement and called on the Secretary of State to resign, following one of the most incredibly personal speeches I have ever heard. This is not new. On 20 May, an SNP press release went out saying, “Mundell must go”. On 21 May, its press release said, “Mundell must go”. On 6 June, it said, “Mundell must step aside”. On 13 June, it said, “Time for shambolic Mundell to go”. On 14 June, it said, “Mundell must go”. This is an SNP broken record. It is a childish contribution. There are two Governments involved. Two people worked on this, and the person who could not reach an agreement is Mike Russell. Perhaps he should consider his position.

The people of Scotland are watching and they see through the SNP’s stunts. They simply see the SNP as standing in the way of the national interest as part of its desire and so-called reason for a second independence referendum.

7.54 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and, indeed, for allowing the debate to happen at all.

There are a number of issues of some significance relating to our constitution that stand to be examined here. Regrettably, we have managed to avoid most of them thus far in the course of the debate, but I hope to be allowed a few minutes to touch on them. This is not just a debate about the constitution in the abstract. I represent two island communities whose economy overwhelmingly depends on fishing, farming and crofting. These communities will absolutely need to know what the future holds post Brexit. They will need to know what is going to come in place of the common agricultural policy—for agricultural support, in particular. When I met representatives of the National Farmers Union Scotland in Orkney on Friday, these were the questions that they were asking me, and time after time I had to say, “I’m sorry—I do not know because nobody knows.” This is not just about the constitution; it is about something that is going to have a very serious and profound effect on the livelihoods of my constituents.

I want to say a word or two about how we got here. The Government have mishandled this whole aspect of Brexit just about as badly as it is possible to imagine. They have certainly managed it as badly as they have managed the whole of the Brexit process. Amendments were promised at the Dispatch Box and we were told that this House would have the opportunity to debate them. Those amendments did not appear. We were then told that they would come in the House of Lords, and indeed they did eventually come, at a late stage, in the House of Lords. In the meantime, the Scottish Parliament, for a variety of different reasons, voted against legislative consent. There was no single reason why the different parties in the Scottish Parliament voted in the way that they did but, notwithstanding that, they all decided that they would withhold legislative consent when the question was put to them.

The timetable that we were given last week should have protected the time available to debate the amendments from the other place. It did not—and that was not an accident. The Government used the procedures of this House to avoid a debate rather than to engage it. For that they are culpable and with that we are now all having to deal. Moreover, the consideration of Lords amendments should not have been presented to us as an either/or. This is the most significant piece of constitutional legislation that we will debate in my lifetime, and we should not at this stage, when it comes to voting on Lords amendments to it, be given a choice of either voting or debating.

The context for this debate is the abject failure of the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government to reach agreement. It is apparent to all who look on from the outside that there has been a lack of good faith in the negotiations between our two Governments. Let me say quite candidly that it is apparent to me that, if it is left to the Scottish and the United Kingdom Governments, then they will never reach agreement because they have no interest in doing so. They are both approaching the Brexit issue through the prism of their own party interest rather than the national interest.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration at the impasse that the two parties have reached—the two parties that initially, and for a considerable period, did not back devolution but now claim to defend it? Both the SNP and the Tories failed to engage in the first stage of the debate.

Mr Carmichael: Of course, we all know that the Conservatives opposed devolution, as did the Scottish National party. I remember the days of the campaign for a Scottish Assembly and of the constitutional convention. I remember a whole series of SNP walkouts. What we saw on Wednesday was just the latest in a long line of these things. When it mattered, the SNP were never to be found, because they are not interested in devolution; devolution is not what they want.

I come back to the frameworks that will be so necessary to my constituents post Brexit. [Interruption.] I do not know if anyone from the SNP Benches wants to intervene.
Peter Grant: I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s disgust at the idea that someone could walk out of the House of Commons in protest at a decision they feel strongly about. Can he tell us how many times he has been part of walkouts in the House of Commons?

Mr Carmichael: I have indeed been part of walkouts. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me this extra minute, because it will not take the full minute to explain it. It was not perhaps the finest example of my parliamentary career, and if the SNP had been wise, they would have learned from my mistakes. They will now have to learn from their own.

The question of the frameworks is at the centre of this. The time we have left is ticking down quickly, and there is still no mechanism by which these frameworks will be agreed. My suspicion is that the Whitehall default is that it will have the final word. Clearly, that will not be good enough. If our Governments cannot decide on a mechanism between them, my suggestion to the House tonight is that it is for us as parliamentarians to come up with that. I do not have all the answers to this, but we already have mechanisms in our Standing Orders through which these things can be discussed. God forbid I would ever want to go back to us hosting the Scottish Grand Committee, but that is one forum in which we might reasonably expect to debate these things, on amendable motions, to reach a common position on which we can all ultimately agree.

As I said earlier, it is apparent that one weakness of our constitutional settlement is that we have no mechanism for Parliament to speak to Parliament. All the mechanisms are about Government speaking to Government. The other weakness of our constitutional settlement is that there is no mechanism for an honest broker in the middle of disputes between the Governments. That is where we now need to focus our attention. We need to move away from this mix of black letter law and constitutional convention, and ultimately, everything should be written down in a constitution.

8.2 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Over recent months we have heard increasingly bizarre claims from SNP politicians in both this place and the Scottish Parliament. They have repeatedly said, without a single shred of evidence and not one example to back up their claims, that a power grab is under way. That is simply a fantasy. When questioned in the Scottish Parliament or asked for further detail in this place, no SNP representative can name a single power that is currently devolved that would be taken back to Westminster. That is because, as Conservative Members know and welcome, Holyrood is on the verge of receiving a vast array of powers that it would never have had if we had remained in the EU.

While I welcome that enhanced devolution, I do so with a certain caution about how the SNP will use those powers—not because of any objection to the powers being devolved, but because when the SNP are set to receive more powers, there inevitably emerges a nervous press release from Bute House saying that actually, it is still the case that we would never have had if we had remained in the EU. There are two aspects to the power grab. The first was explained by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act is very clear: if it is not reserved, it is devolved. What is happening now is that powers that are not reserved to this Parliament are being stopped in their tracks from Brussels and reserved to the House of Commons. I know why the SNP are reluctant to talk about specific powers in the context of this debate. It is because they want nothing to do with these powers and have zero interest in taking them on. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the only thing they want is for someone else to have these powers. They do not want these powers because all the SNP want to do is to give every single one of them back to Brussels. Do they want to manage agriculture to diversify and grow our rural economy? No—far better to leave the European Commission to tell them how to do it. Are they interested in revitalising our coastal communities by leaving, in the words of their idol, Alex Salmond, the “dead hand” of the common fisheries policy? No. They would see our fishing industry tied to the disastrous CFP indefinitely—a stance that was reinforced by their MEPs only a couple of weeks ago. Will they ever take responsibility and get on with governing? No, because they would rather campaign for an unwanted referendum than get on with the day job.

I know full well that the SNP are not interested in being constructive because, at the end of the day, they are not interested in governing. They have a single objective, which overshadows every policy, every press release and every negotiation, and that is to break up our Union—the Union that Scotland voted to remain part of in 2014. Scotland’s opinions have not changed. In fact, the last election allowed voters the chance to voice to the SNP their concerns and outrage at them riding roughshod over the referendum result, and half a million people voiced their concerns loudly and clearly.

Nicola Sturgeon’s Government are not an honest broker looking to get the best outcome for Scotland. Her Government are a wrecking ball designed to tear our nation apart. It is incredibly disappointing, but not at all surprising, to see that mentality in SNP Members, who take their instructions from the party machine with no regard for representing their constituents. If they did, they would listen to their constituents’ views and reach agreement. However, we can only reach agreement with those who have the desire to come to an agreement.
 Commons, rather than being devolved to the Scottish Parliament. That is the first aspect of the grab of the 24 powers that have been spoken about so many times.

The second and more important aspect of the power grab is the contempt with which the refusal to grant a legislative consent motion is being treated. The decision of the House of Commons last Tuesday to vote through amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that the Scottish Parliament had expressly refused its consent to is a fundamental change to the nature of the devolution settlement. It fundamentally undermines 20 years of devolution. That is the real power grab: this Parliament expressing its sovereignty in the face of the sovereignty that the people of Scotland expressed in their legitimately elected Parliament.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that these powers being reserved is a fundamental challenge to devolution. Can he tell me how agricultural fertiliser regulations pose a fundamental challenge to devolution? How do powers relating to elements of reciprocal healthcare pose a fundamental challenge to devolution? Those are two of the 24 powers being reserved. This is not a challenge to devolution; it is just common sense.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman has a far more rural constituency than I do. Perhaps the farmers in his constituency are happy with the idea that this Parliament will simply legislate on those issues and ride roughshod, without the elected Members of the Scottish Parliament having a say, but I am not sure that the farmers in my constituency of Glasgow North would share that view.

The saddest thing is that it did not really have to come to any of this. This simply has not been on the Government’s radar. Whether that is because of a failure by the Secretary of State for Scotland to make Scotland’s voice heard in Cabinet or because Scotland is simply not important to the Tories does not really matter. The reality is that on Tuesday and Wednesday last week, we saw Government Whips running around the Benches negotiating amendments to the withdrawal Bill in real time. Months of meetings in the Joint Ministerial Committee and of messages, statements, questions and debates led by Members from all the different parties in Scotland in this House seem to have had absolutely no effect on the UK Government. That is a demonstration of the contempt, of the power grab and of them riding roughshod over the views of Scotland expressed in the Scottish Parliament.

Ironically, and I have raised this before, there are still ways out for the Government, but they have so far refused to take them. On Thursday, I raised the issue of Royal Assent. It is up to the Government when the final version of the EU withdrawal Bill is put forward for Royal Assent. The Minister could stand up now and commit that they will not do so until agreement has been reached with the Scottish Government. Otherwise, presenting a Bill for Royal Assent while consent has been withheld is in blatant breach of the Sewel convention, which was put on a statutory basis in the Scotland Act after 2015—the greatest, most devolved Parliament in the entire history of the known universe snapped out and snuffed out just like that by this House of Commons after a paltry 19 minutes of debate, or one minute of debate for every year of devolution.

Let me say this on devolution and the Scottish National party—I say it with the greatest of respect to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). In 1997, when I was 17 years old, I was out on the streets of Inverness knocking on doors for the yes, yes campaign. I do not remember that many Liberal Democrat activists joining us, and that was a Liberal Democrat seat at the time. The reality is that the Scottish National party helped, on a cross-party basis, to deliver devolution and it has consistently delivered success in devolution, and the only people isolated throughout that period have been the Scottish Conservatives.

Mr Carmichael: Will the hon. Gentleman remind us of the role in the constitutional convention, building the blueprint that created the Scottish Parliament, of the SNP?

Patrick Grady: Of course, in the early days the Scottish National party had an interest in the process of the constitutional convention, but the constitutional convention decided that it would not consider independence. There was a founding document of the constitutional convention—I am very happy to discuss it, because this is of fundamental importance to the Conservatives. I defy any of the Scottish Conservatives to get up now and say that they will endorse the claim of right for Scotland; it is one of the founding documents. The claim of right for Scotland says that it is the fundamental sovereignty of the people of Scotland to determine their own constitutional future. The only party that has never signed the claim of right for Scotland—it refused to sign it in 1989 and it refused to endorse it when it was put to the Scottish Parliament in 2012—is the Scottish Conservatives. If one of the Scottish Conservatives wants to get up now and say that they endorse the claim of right for Scotland, I will be very glad to hear it. No? And a silence fell upon the assembly.

Of course, the great irony in all of this—is the question which the Minister for the Cabinet Office must answer—is the fundamental damage that is being done to the UK constitution as a whole. We regularly have the farce of the English votes for English laws procedure in the House of Commons, when the English Grand Committee—the English Parliament—is asked to grant a legislative consent motion to whatever it has already consented to. What is the point of that Evel procedure now if legislative consent motions from the Scottish Parliament—and potentially from the Welsh Assembly and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Assembly—are not even going to be paid attention to?

The reality is that the Government have completely failed to respect the outcomes of both the independence and the Brexit referendums. They have refused to respect the differential result in Scotland, Northern Ireland, London and Gibraltar. This goes beyond the simple question of the Sewel convention as it applies to Scotland; it is about how it applies across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Government are so determined simply to cling on to office that they do not even seem interested in the consequences of the decisions they are making and the constitutional havoc they are wreaking.

Whether by accident or design, things have changed. The 20th anniversary of the Scotland Act heralds a new era of devolution and it is not the era that was promised by the no campaign in 2014. I am very fond of Alasdair Gray’s saying that we should
Patrick Grady

“Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation”. There is another saying that the darkest hour comes just before the dawn. This is a very dark hour for devolution, but perhaps that means the new dawn of an independent Scotland, where full powers are in our own control, is on the way and those really will be the early days of a better nation.

8.13 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

“All this crowd are interested in doing is performing stunts and disrupting Parliament.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the SNP’s Deputy First Minister in Scotland, John Swinney, when an Opposition party in Holyrood performed the same theatrics that we saw from SNP Members last week. Their own Deputy First Minister thinks that they should be in Parliament standing up for their constituents and listening to the debate, rather than walking out. I agree with John Swinney, and I hope, in the cold light of day, that SNP Members will reflect on what they did last week and also agree with their Deputy First Minister.

I want to move on to the points I put to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). In my intervention, I made two specific points, neither of which were answered. I asked, first, how many powers the Scottish Parliament currently has and how many it will have after the implementation of the legislation in this Parliament, because if it is a power grab, there must be fewer powers afterwards. I am giving an open invitation to all SNP MPs in the Chamber to stand up and intervene on me to tell me how many powers the Scottish Parliament currently has and how many it will have after the legislation has gone through the Westminster Parliament. How many fewer powers will there be? Come on! Nobody? Nobody, because they cannot answer.

They cannot defend their claim of a power grab because it does not exist. Their leader could not answer the question in my intervention, and now the entire parliamentary party cannot intervene to tell me the answer, because it is not happening and will not happen. They are not losing any powers; they are gaining powers as a result of this Government.

The second question I put to the right hon. Gentleman was: what was his party’s position in the 1997 general election? He stood up and said that the Conservatives opposed devolution in 1997, but the SNP opposed devolution in the 1997 general election. I have read its manifesto for the 1997 election, because the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said that he wanted to give people a full copy. I ha ve read its manifesto for the 1997 election. It said: “Devolution was never mentioned: in those 37 pages, it was never once mentioned. Why? Because it is all about separation for the SNP. Every year, every month, every day, every hour—it is about separation for the SNP. It opposed devolution in the 1997 general election, and they are working against it now because it is not in the interests of separation.”

Jonathan Edwards: Several of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues have referred to the deal struck by the Government of my country with the UK Government. However, during a session of the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee of the National Assembly, Professor Tim Lang was asked what he thought the consequences would be for Welsh agricultural interests, and he said that Welsh interests would now be “steamrollable” following the Welsh Government’s capitulation. Is that what the hon. Gentleman wants for Scotland?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention because I am about to speak about Wales and about other people.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said that the people of Scotland are watching. They are watching, but does the SNP know what they are saying? They can see the grievance politics of the SNP. They will come to their own conclusions about why the SNP Scottish Government have ignored the Scottish Parliament’s Presiding Officer, who has said that its continuity Bill was outwith the remit of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish public will have to wonder why the SNP does not accept the concessions from the UK Government that have met with the approval of the Welsh Assembly and of Welsh Labour. The SNP told us that it was hand in glove with the Welsh Government in these negotiations, but all of a sudden, with concessions from the UK Government, we have agreement in unionist Wales, but not in separatist Scotland.

The people of Scotland have to ask why Labour and Liberal Democrat peers are wrong when they say that the devolution settlement will be respected. Many of those peers are the architects of devolution itself, yet they can agree with what the UK Government are putting forward. The public in Scotland will also have to ask why the SNP thinks that Lord Sewel is wrong. The man who gave his name to the convention we are discussing today says that he backs the UK Government position. Lord Sewel has said today that he backs what the UK Government are doing, which is respecting the devolution settlement of our country.

Yes, the people of Scotland are watching, and they see the SNP working in the nationalist interest rather than in the national interest. I want more for Scotland: I want Scotland to get more powers from this UK Government, and that is what is happening. People will have to ask: why does the SNP not want these powers, and why does it want to give these powers straight back to Europe? As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) said, it wants to do so for fishing. That is hugely important in my constituency of Moray, yet the SNP does not want fisheries powers to come from Westminster to Holyrood; it wants them to go back to Europe.

My final message to SNP Members today is: if they do not want these powers, Scottish Conservatives do, and after the next election in Scotland, Ruth Davidson will use these powers as First Minister of Scotland. The public can see that those who do not want and cannot use these powers need to be replaced, and the Scottish Conservatives are ready to do so.

8.19 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I have news for the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross): the SNP supports independence.
When the story of independence is told, as it surely will be, some key events will be highlighted as critically important: the election of Winnie Ewing to this place in 1967; Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister and her imposition of the poll tax; the fall of new Labour and the illegal invasion of Iraq; the creation of the Scottish Parliament and subsequent election of Alex Salmond as First Minister; and the election of an SNP Government in 2007 and every election since.

However, I suspect that last Tuesday’s disgraceful events, when the devolution settlement was ripped up in 15 minutes with no Scottish speaker, will, in due course, go down as perhaps the key moment when Scotland’s fate as an independent country was sealed. Since the 2015 election, the SNP group has worked hard to represent our constituents and hold the Government to account. As this Parliament’s third party, we have, in large part, played the Westminster system. While the Labour Party has been in disarray, we have acted as the main Opposition. We have remained consistent and principled on so many issues, such as Brexit.

The Westminster system does not come naturally to the SNP. I am sure that viewers watching in Scotland, where a modern efficient Scottish Parliament has such with Scotland’s time at Westminster may be coming to an end. Murray Foote, former editor of the Daily Record and the architect of “the vow”, is one of those who now support independence, calling Westminster’s behaviour last week a “democratic abomination”. [Interruption.] I am not entirely sure what the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) finds so funny: the Westminster system here strange and unusual. We have tried our best to highlight these strange procedures, but also worked with them as best we can, so that we can stand up for our constituents and for Scotland. But last week’s events said it all: no matter how hard Scottish MPs of any party work in this place, no matter how much patience we show, the Westminster system itself does not work for Scotland.

As we have heard already, the Tories are no friends of the Scottish Parliament; they campaigned against its very creation. Their Brexit power grab shows that they want powers that should rightly be transferred directly to Edinburgh, as per the Scotland Act 2016, kept in this place—the Palace of Westminster.

The issue now extends beyond Brexit. It is not about whether someone voted for Brexit or to remain, but about whether Westminster can serve Scotland. The Tories’ behaviour over the past week has brought people of all political persuasions and none together in believing that Westminster may be coming to an end. The SNP group has worked hard to represent our constituents and hold the Government to account. As this Parliament’s third party, we have, in large part, played the Westminster system. While the Labour Party has been in disarray, we have acted as the main Opposition. We have remained consistent and principled on so many issues, such as Brexit.

The Tories hoped that no one in Scotland would notice or care about Westminster’s power grab and the lack of time afforded to the debate itself. How wrong they were. I actually disagreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) when he said that it was Scotland versus the Tories; it is the Tories versus Scotland. Let me assure the people of Scotland, including my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire North, that the SNP will continue to stand up for them and their Parliament. We will campaign to bring forward emergency legislation to end the power grab, protect the powers of the Scottish Parliament and ensure that Brexit does not harm jobs and living standards in Scotland. I lay that same challenge down to the Scottish Tories: will they stand up for Scotland, or will they continue to treat voters in Scotland with utter contempt?

8.24 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): This issue is relatively simple. The EU referendum was a UK-wide vote, and more than 1 million people in Scotland voted to leave the EU. In 2014, a referendum decided that Scotland should remain a part of the UK; the separatist argument lost by 10 percentage points—a significantly greater margin than in the EU referendum whose business currently preoccupies the House.

Respecting the will of the people of Scotland, which is constantly brought up by SNP Members, is exactly what the Government side of the House is doing. People in Scotland voted to remain Scottish and British—to have a devolved Parliament in Edinburgh, but also have their Parliament here in Westminster. It was a constitutional decision that reinforces our current structure of government and made sure that we still keep this Parliament of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland here in Westminster and sovereign, with directly elected representatives.

Section 2 of the Scotland Act 2016, which was shaped by the cross-party Smith commission, is unambiguous in asserting the UK Parliament’s power to make laws for Scotland and that devolution does not diminish that power. The Act also recognises the Sewel convention, which states: “it is recognised that the Parliament of the United Kingdom will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament.” But these are not devolved matters and these are clearly not “normal times”, as Mike Russell MSP recently acknowledged.

The convention also does not apply to reserved matters. Schedule 5, part 1 of the 2016 Act defines, among others, the constitution and foreign affairs as explicitly reserved powers for MPs in this House to discuss and decide. The European Union could not legitimately be defined as that “which is normally dealt with by the Scottish Parliament”, but very clearly comes under the powers reserved to this place. It is for those very reasons that the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament deemed the SNP Administration’s EU continuity Bill—rushed through, by the way, as emergency legislation, with just 25 hours of debate—to be outwith the competence of the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, far from protecting, or even respecting, the devolution settlement, the SNP is showing complete contempt for it and for our constituents.
The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and this whole debate is concerned with where powers that previously sat in Brussels will now sit in the UK. It is ironic that the SNP is fine with having unelected Brussels bureaucrats set laws for Scotland, but finds it an outrage when this Parliament, which is also Scotland’s Parliament and has its own directly elected MPs, makes laws. It cannot be a power grab if Holyrood never had those powers to begin with. Finally, even today, Lord Sewel, who I imagine has some insight into these matters, stated clearly that Westminster needs the power to move ahead and that there is no constitutional crisis.

To recap, that is the Scotland Act 2016, the Smith commission, the SNP MSP responsible for the constitution, the former SNP deputy leader and Lord Sewel himself all clearly acknowledging the validity of the Sewel convention and reinforcing the sovereignty of this House. We should take a moment to remember what devolution was truly meant to be about—not erecting a wall between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, but bringing power closer to communities throughout the UK.

Furthermore, the Smith commission went one further by saying that powers should come from Holyrood to individual local authorities. Has that happened in Scotland? No—there has been a clear centralisation of power in Edinburgh. Powers are being taken from Westminster and centralised in Edinburgh with no respect. This is not good devolution or bad devolution—it is deliberately dysfunctional devolution, stoked by an SNP that is so obsessed by separation from the United Kingdom that it cannot countenance even making an agreement with it.

As I outlined earlier, it is really clear that this is not about the 24 powers in relation to the UK common framework; this is about fertiliser, food labelling and standards. When I was looking, there was no one in my constituency saying, “We want them to be so drastically different from the rest of the UK, it is an assault on devolution.” That is what the 24 powers are about. If we want to get into the detail, we should engage with it.

We have been threatened tonight with disruption, with another referendum, with “paying a price” as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said. Well, you carry on with the threats. We will focus on delivering for our constituencies. What we have seen in the last week is very, very simple: the mask will focus on delivering for our constituencies. What we want to get into the detail, we should engage with it.

What will this mean in practice? We have been talking about 24 powers, haven’t we? Well, in Wales there has been some mission creep, with two more—state aid and food geographical indications—to make it 26 powers. That means something in practice for Wales. It will mean the denial of state aid for threatened industries, such as steel, by a Government who believe in an unfettered free market. It will mean an agricultural policy no longer designed to protect farming and the rural economy, and all that means for Wales in terms of the environment, our language and our culture. It will mean slash and burn procurement policies hardwired to ignore social and community benefits of public expenditure. It will mean enabling once again the selling-off of Wales’s fish stocks to the highest bidder, something our Government should have been able to prevent and will now not be able to do.

Developing common frameworks for the UK as a whole should require mature co-operation between the national Governments of the UK, and should not be a case of one country asset-stripping powers from the others to impose a once-size-fits-all England-first framework across all the UK’s countries. Yet at the very same time, Westminster will only be bound by political promises while the devolved Governments face legal constraints—Westminster acting again as judge and jury.

The disregard for Welsh democracy is endemic. Despite Labour’s half-baked attempt at improving the power grab clause, the people of Wales would be forgiven for thinking the Opposition and the Tory Government were colluding to deny Wales its voice. To rub salt into an already aggravated wound, the Labour party needlessly pressed ahead with 11 consecutive votes, some of which were duplicates that it knew full well would lose, all the while eating into time for the devolution debate. Not only did the Labour party facilitate the farce of a debate that took place last Tuesday, with the exception of one hon. Gentleman it abstained. I note the presence of just one Labour Member from Wales this evening. Labour abstained on amendments that took powers away from our National Assembly for Wales.

It speaks volumes for the lack of respect on the part of the British Government that they are ploughing ahead with the Bill before the Supreme Court reaches a verdict on the Scottish continuity Bill. As we know, as part of the deal between the Unionist parties, the Labour-Welsh Government agreed to withdraw the Welsh continuity Bill and its referral to court. In what can only be described as a convoluted turn of events, I understand that the Labour Welsh Government have requested to re-participate in the Scottish continuity Bill Supreme Court case, but this time, as obedient good Unionists, in defence of the UK Government’s position.

When my party argued in favour of remain in 2016, we did so because we believed—and believe—that small nations like Wales are served better sitting alongside the other successful small nations of Europe as equals. We argued that the inherent inequality of the UK would make Wales expendable political collateral to the overriding interests of England. And we were right. While Tory and Labour Unionists—40 MPs, remember, out of 650;
look at the maths for how the inequality is written in—work hand in glove, I am confident that Brexit will be a landmark in the journey Wales takes to our own conclusion. Only our own, radical solutions will prove the answer to our needs. Westminster and its parties will always treat Wales like an adjunct, an afterthought, an inconvenience. All that does is make the case for Welsh political independence.

8.34 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak tonight, because I, too, was frustrated by the Labour party’s determination to silence the voice of Scotland last week by dividing 11 times on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I am grateful for the opportunity to give up my evening to talk about important issues.

Section 28(7) of the Scotland Act 1998 reads as follows: this Act “does not affect the power of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to make laws for Scotland.”

The White Paper, “Scotland’s Parliament”, published in July 1997, states that “there may be instances (eg international obligations which touch on devolved as well as reserved matters) where it will be more convenient for legislation to be passed by the UK Parliament”.

The Scotland Act and the White Paper that preceded it are very clear: this sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom can legally legislate for the entire United Kingdom. However, as is normally the case, we desire consent from the Scottish Parliament, and that is exactly what this Government have sought to achieve through months of dialogue and talks with the Administrations in Edinburgh, and of course in Cardiff, with regards to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. But as Mike Russell has said, these are “not normal times”.

It is simply wrong to suggest, as the SNP has tonight and prior to this, that Her Majesty’s Government are trying to ram through legislation that somehow threatens the devolution settlement. They have not and it does not. In fact, the only conclusion one can really come to as to why the Welsh Government appear content with new clause 15 and the Scottish nationalists do not is that the Scottish Parliament has never wanted to come to an agreement. The destruction of our United Kingdom is the raison d’être of the SNP, and nothing else—not the economy, the internal market of the UK, or the common frameworks for agriculture or fisheries—no, nothing matters but the break-up of our United Kingdom, hence their manufactured constitutional crisis and their temper tantrum last week during Prime Minister’s questions.

The SNP leadership claims that the people of Scotland are not being listened to. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), I spent the weekend—[Interruption.] I regard him as a friend, actually—I do not know how that will go down in Paisley, but I will leave that to him. I was out this weekend talking to my constituents in Echt, Tough, Sauchen, Monymusk and Drumoak, and I was listening to what the people there were saying. I tell you what, if Brexit and the constitution came up at all—which, I have to admit, it rarely did—the people said that they were sick to death of the childish games being played by the nationalists. They told me that what we should be doing is respecting the result and working together to guarantee a fruitful future for our farmers, our fishermen, our businesses and our people. That should be what we are doing now—not fostering grudge and grievance or manufacturing a constitutional crisis, for that is what they are doing. Even Lord Sewel, my constituent and the author of the Sewel convention, agrees that there is no crisis and that the Government are absolutely right to move ahead without consent due to Brexit being a major adjustment.

This Government have been open, honest and willing to make changes, and in new clause 15, there have been changes. For the avoidance of doubt, although it does not bear being repeated again, let us be absolutely clear: there is no power grab. Not one single power is being stripped from the Scottish Parliament. In fact, 80 new powers are returning from Brussels straight back to Holyrood, where the SNP would have them remain, and another 24—all of them agreed with the Administration in Edinburgh—will be temporarily held at Westminster, subject to a sunset clause, which, again, the Scottish Government asked for.

This Conservative Government are legislating for the entire United Kingdom and all its people. We have made concessions on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to make it work and for it to be acceptable to the people of all of our country. We are the party that is committed to building a Britain fit for the future, making a success of Brexit and enhancing devolution. In fact, we are the only party of devolution, governing in the national interest—a one-nation party for one nation, for every part of the UK. The Conservatives are getting on with governing, while the SNP is just getting on with gurning.

8.38 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I got the impression over the weekend that Government Members and the metropolitan commentariat were rather surprised at the strength of feeling displayed by SNP MPs last week at the pitiful amount of time that was allowed for debate of these matters, but they should be in no doubt that that strength of feeling is felt across Scotland. On the flight home and in my constituency at the weekend, I was inundated by members of the public congratulating us on taking the stance that we did. In incon demonstrative Edinburgh, I was unable to get my messages down in Marks & Spencer at Slateford for people coming up to me wanting to shake my hand and tooting their car horns, shouting out that we had done the right thing.

Lest it be thought, then, that this is only about what we individual SNP Members think, I want to devote what little time I have to some of the views held by members of the Scottish commentariat, Scottish civic society and a prominent Scottish constitutional lawyer. The position was neatly summed up at the weekend by the distinguished journalist and commentator Kevin McKenna, who is not afraid to criticise my party when he does not agree with it, when he wrote in The Observer at the weekend:

“The UK government has sought to portray the SNP’s anger over the power grab as illusory to the point of non-existent. ‘The 24 powers will eventually make their way to Holyrood, so what’s the problem?’ they ask. The problem is threefold.”
First:

“It could take up to seven years for these powers to return, a period that would outlast a term of government on either side of the border.”

Secondly:

“At any time, during this period the UK government could alter them as they see fit.”

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly:

“A precedent has also been set allowing any UK government to override the Sewel convention by Westminster won’t legislate on devolved competencies without Holyrood’s permission.”

That is not my view but the view of Mr McKenna.

The Sewel convention provides that Westminster will “not normally” legislate on a devolved matter without devolved consent. I am afraid that an awful lot of nonsense has been talked about what the word “normally” means. Fortunately, the House need not take my word for it; Aileen McHarg, professor of public law at the University of Strathclyde, very helpfully set out at the weekend some of her views on what “not normally” meant. She says it does not mean:

“Goodness me, this situation is a bit unusual; we can therefore ignore the usual constitutional rules.”

It does not mean, she says: “I say”, “it’s jolly difficult if we have to agree stuff with” the Scots and “the devolved institutions; let’s just ignore them.”

Nor does “not normally” mean, she says:

“So long as we make some kind of effort to reach agreement (even if it’s a bit late and we have to be forced into it), it doesn’t matter if we can’t actually reach agreement.”

What “not normally” means is as follows. The Sewel convention is a rule, not merely a description of practice, so the word “normally” has to be understood as an exception to the rule. According to the principles of legal interpretation, we make exceptions to a rule either where the underlying rationale for the rule does not apply or where there is some overriding competing principle.

The rationale for the Sewel convention is protection of devolved autonomy. It is not clear to me or Professor McHarg why the protection of devolution should be suspended by the Brexit vote, particularly when Scots did not vote for Brexit by a majority of two to one. Professor McHarg concludes, on the basis of what few precedents there are, and of the discussions at the time of the enactment of the Scotland Act and in relation to the old Stornmont convention, that devolved consent can be overridden only in cases of necessity or where the devolved legislature is abusing its power. There is no evidence that the devolved legislature is abusing its power, and, in order to have frameworks, there is no necessity for those frameworks to be imposed from above.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given what my hon. and learned Friend has just informed the Chamber of, could not the Executive in London be accused of abusing their power?

Joanna Cherry: Indeed. It is the Executive in London who are abusing their power. In the words of the BBC’s “Reality Check” website, the Sewel convention was “ripped up” and thrown away by last week’s amendments.

I will conclude with a word of warning for the Tories from another commentator, Dani Garavelli, who wrote in The Guardian:

“As for ordinary voters, they may not be greatly exercised about the finer points of the constitution... But they can hear the mood music; they know when their parliament is being slighted. Already frustrated over the democratic deficit that allows Scotland to be taken out of the EU when every part of the country voted remain, many of them will look askance at the dismissive way Conservative politicians behaved in the chamber on Wednesday.”

In relation to displays of anger from me and others last week, she says that such anger “will be echoed around much of the country. Anyone who doesn’t understand the potential impact of such condescension on the psyche of Scottish voters wasn’t paying enough attention last time around.”

I look forward to putting pictures of their jeering faces on the leaflets at the next independence referendum.

8.44 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Aviation—compensating public service obligation air routes; carbon capture and storage; control of major accident hazards; electronic road toll systems; elements of EU social security co-ordination; marine environment issues; the energy performance of buildings directive; the environmental impact assessment directive; environmental law concerning energy industries; flood risk management; water quality; water resources; domestic forestry; genetically modified micro-organisms contained use; heat metering and billing information; implementation of cross-border healthcare rights to treatment and reimbursement; land use; maritime—public service contracts; ports services; oshore hydrocarbons licensing; the renewable energy directive; road infrastructure safety management; charging of heavy goods vehicles; voting rights and candidacy rules for EU citizens in local government elections; blood safety and quality; applicable law in contracts and non-contractual obligations; cross-border mediation; jurisdiction and recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters; enforcement of judgments: instruments in family law; legal aid in cross-border cases; service of documents and taking of evidence; uniform fast-track procedures for certain civil and commercial claims; efficiency in energy use; elements of the regulation of tobacco and related products; air quality; biodiversity; marine environment; natural environment and biodiversity; spatial data infrastructure standards; waste management; equal treatment legislation; good laboratory practice; high-efficiency cogeneration; late payment for commercial transactions—the list goes on and on.

There is no power grab. More than 80 powers that the Scottish Parliament does not currently have, and would not have if we were not leaving the European Union, will go to it on the day we leave the European Union, and 24 other areas—each and every one agreed with the Scottish Government—will remain temporarily with the United Kingdom under common frameworks.

There is no power grab. What we are seeing is the honouring of a commitment given by this Conservative UK Government to respect and strengthen the devolution settlement, and to protect the integrity of our United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. The Front-Bench spokesmen will now speak. I know that they will try to stick to 10 minutes each, because I am keen to accommodate remaining speakers, but we will see how things go.

8.47 pm

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Let me begin by echoing some of the sentiments that have been expressed tonight about the fire at the Glasgow School of Art. Let me also thank my colleague the junior shadow Minister for the efforts that he has made to raise the profile of this issue, appearing on Canadian television tonight. That demonstrates that it really is a global issue.

I remind the people in this Chamber, and the people we represent, that the debate is of the utmost importance. I also acknowledge that several Scottish Members are unable to attend today, as they are otherwise engaged with the Scottish Affairs Committee.

At the heart of the debate are concerns about the future of the Scottish devolution settlement, and about the future of the United Kingdom itself. In that context, it is unbelievable that the Minister responsible for these matters has chosen to absent himself. Let us be clear: responsibility for the position in which we find ourselves today sits squarely in the lap of the Conservative party. This Tory shambles is epitomised by the Secretary of State, the invisible man in the Cabinet, who is now missing in action rather than being at the Dispatch Box. This is not a personal attack, but it is a critique of a performance. The Secretary of State has been AWOL on many fronts. He is not at the Brexit negotiating table; he is not able to keep his commitments to the House; he is not able to deliver for the Scottish Parliament; and he is not able to deliver on the commitments that he made to his colleagues on clause 11.

Today’s debate, and the Tory shambles, were totally avoidable. The Tories’ approach involves playing fast and loose with devolution, and with the future of the United Kingdom. The current approach of a party that claims to want to protect the Union serves only one purpose, and that is to play into the hands of the Scottish National party, which—let us all be clear about this—does not want to protect devolution, and which never wanted it in the first place.

In contrast, let me set out the grown-up approach taken by the Scottish Labour party. As the party of devolution, we want to protect devolution and protect the future of the UK at the same time. That is why Labour in the Scottish Parliament voted along with the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens to withhold consent for the EU withdrawal Bill, particularly due to the provisions in clause 11. At that point the Tory Government must surely have understood the depth of concern about the way they were proposing to utilise the new powers, but, alas, they did not. Instead, they carried on regardless, ignoring the Scottish Parliament and playing into the hands of the SNP. In acting in this way, it has become abundantly clear that the Tories are as much a threat to the UK as the nationalists.

Let me outline how and why this shambles came about. We are here because the Secretary of State for Scotland and his UK Government decided when they drafted the EU withdrawal Bill that all powers coming back from the EU would come to Westminster and be devolved to the devolved Administrations at a time of their choosing, something that is entirely incompatible with the devolution settlement, a fact that their own Scottish MPs acknowledge.

The Secretary of State for Scotland then promised on four different occasions that he would fix this flawed course, but he did not. Last Tuesday he managed to do something that I do not think anyone in this House could have envisaged: be explicit in a situation where no Scottish MPs or the Secretary of State for Scotland were able to speak about devolution, truly taking this process to a new level of farce.

A number of hon. Members have suggested that it was Labour that somehow disrupted this debate—that Labour somehow stopped democracy happening—but it was the Conservatives who set the timetable. In fact, they wished to set the debate for only one day, and only on our pressing did they set it for two. But that was still not enough to debate what are some of the biggest constitutional issues this country is facing.

Labour throughout this process has tried to play a constructive role. We have tabled amendments and made suggestions to both Governments. These could have helped break the deadlock; but instead what we have seen is two competing nationalisms entrenched and intent on cancelling each other out.

Throughout this process only Labour has genuinely sought an agreement that protects devolution and breaks the impasse. The leader of Scottish Labour and I wrote to the First Secretary of State asking for cross-party talks; so far he has refused.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lesley Laird: I will not give way; the opposition has had ample time to state its case.

I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Scotland urging him to facilitate these talks; so far he has refused. On each occasion the mantra has been, “Unless there is something new to discuss we will not meet.” If that is the Government’s approach, it is a defeatist one. That is why it is time to freshen up the Treasury Bench. As other Members have said, it is time to take a fresh approach and bring new thinking to the table: to bring experts on law and the constitution to the table, and to bring in people from industry and business who ultimately will have to make sense of it all. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) pointed out, the NFU and others are waiting to see what that will look like. The Government have clearly run out of ideas, but openness to new ideas is of course predicated on having a genuine desire to resolve the issue, and so far their reluctance to do that may suggest that they are indeed content with the way things are.

Once again it will be Labour that brings forward proposals to break the deadlock. I will again be writing to the First Secretary of State and also Mike Russell with a further proposal that, at the very least, should compel all parties and experts to get around the negotiating table and find a way to resolve this issue, because while we may have the luxury of standing here debating the constitutional implications of the Sewel convention, we must remember that behind all of this constitutional wrangling, people and businesses require certainty, and require both of Scotland’s Governments to work constructively together to reach a solution. We understand
the need to negotiate on the common UK frameworks, but we do not understand why the industries and sectors that will be impacted have not been actively involved in the negotiations.

Let us be in no doubt that we are in this mess because of the UK Government. There has been no Joint Ministerial Committee meeting for eight months. That is eight months of time wasted that could have been used to sort this out. It is also my understanding that two JMC meetings have been cancelled in recent weeks. It is abundantly clear that deeds are not matching words. The Secretary of State for Scotland has stated:

“Scotland is not a partner of the United Kingdom; Scotland is part of the United Kingdom.”—[Official Report, 14 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 1129.]

That really tells us all we need to know.

Since Brexit, it has become clear that the intergovernmental and constitutional mechanisms in the UK are inadequate, and the debate that we are having about the Sewel convention serves only to reaffirm that case. The Secretary of State for Scotland cannot even be compelled to come to the Dispatch Box to answer for his decisions and his quite obvious failings on this matter. We also have a situation in which the UK Government can ride roughshod over the wishes of a democratically elected Parliament in Scotland, and there is no recourse. [Interruption.] That is why it is called democracy; that is why it is called devolution. People in Scotland will be looking on at this and wondering whether the UK Government have any real intention of trying to fix it. They will be wondering whether not getting a deal and causing a constitutional crisis are actually politically beneficial to those who are nationalists on both sides of the argument. Constitutional debates only fuel the politics of grievance; they do not fuel economic stability, equality or social justice. They just divert us from addressing those real issues in our society.

In closing, I ask the First Secretary of State to be bold and to demonstrate the courage this situation requires by committing to four simple things. First, will he show political leadership by getting back to the negotiating table and convening a cross-party meeting—which the Leader of the SNP in this House has indicated he would be willing to attend—including legal and constitutional experts, to resolve the issues on the devolution settlement and to use the new offer that I will send him to resolve the impasse?

Secondly, clause 22 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill allows for consequential amendments to be made to the Bill where that is appropriate. Has the right hon. Gentleman explored this avenue, and will he be open to consequential amendments to the clause? Thirdly, the Secretary of State for Scotland has so far refused to publish the minutes of all meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee. Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office agree to do so now and also set a date for a JMC meeting before the recess? Finally, if there is no agreement between the UK and Scottish Governments, will he ask the Prime Minister to sack the Secretary of State for Scotland? By virtue of his standing here today, it is clear that the Minister for the Cabinet Office does not have confidence in his colleague to deliver for the people of Scotland.

8.58 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I should like to start on what I hope will be a note of consensus by expressing on behalf of the Government and personally my deep sorrow at the appalling news from the Glasgow School of Art over the weekend. I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland said at the weekend—namely, that the United Kingdom Government stand ready to help, just as we did when we came forward with assistance after the last such tragedy a few years ago.

I will try to respond to the various points that have been raised during the debate, and I will try to keep to time in doing so. For that reason, I intend to be perhaps less generous than I would normally be in admitting interventions, in order to allow other hon. Members to take part after I have sat down.

It might help us to get a bit of perspective about the subject we are discussing to take note of what none other than Lord Sewel himself said today. He observed that there has been no power grab and that there is no constitutional crisis. The UK Government’s two objectives in the negotiations and the various debates on what is now clause 15 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill have been consistent and clear.

The first is to provide greater reassurance to the devolved Governments and parliamentarians on how returning EU powers will be managed where they intersect with devolved competences. The second is to maximise legal certainty right across the United Kingdom, particularly for the sake of the businesses not only in Scotland, but in Wales, Northern Ireland and England that have been making it clear that they want clarity and certainty about the regulatory framework within which they will have to operate in the United Kingdom after we leave the European Union.

If we look back at October 2017, a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations, which included Ministers from the Scottish and Welsh Governments, agreed “to work together to establish common approaches in some areas that are currently governed by EU law, but that are otherwise within areas of competence of the devolved administrations or legislatures.”

The same meeting secured agreement on a set of criteria to establish the need for a UK-wide framework, including to enable the functioning of the UK internal market, to ensure compliance with international obligations and to ensure that the UK can negotiate, enter into and implement new international trade agreements and treaties. To respond briefly to what the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, the communiqué from that meeting, like other communiqués from the Joint Ministerial Committee, was published and is on the gov.uk website to this day. That meeting also agreed that some frameworks, although not all of them, would need legislation.

The original clause dealing with devolution—what was then clause 11—was strongly criticised in this House, in the Scottish Parliament, in the Welsh Assembly and by both devolved Governments. In the months since the result here, there have been frequent and detailed discussions at both ministerial and official levels to try to meet those concerns. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) asserted, we have
responded to those criticisms. First, we heard that it was wrong to require, as clause 11 did, that all powers returning from Brussels should be held at Westminster until a decision to transfer them to devolved competence had been made. That point was made by the Scottish Parliament’s Finance and Constitution Committee and by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) during the debate on 4 December 2017. Having listened to those criticisms, we reversed that approach. The Bill now provides for every power to be transferred straight to devolved level unless a specific order is made to stay it at Westminster.

Secondly, it was said that too many areas of policy were covered by the freezing power. Intensive discussions between officials and experts of both the United Kingdom and devolved Governments led to the list of now only 24 out of 153 areas of competence where a legislative framework might be required. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) pointed out, the long list of new powers going straight to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly is extensive indeed.

Thirdly, there were calls for a sunset clause from, again, the Scottish Parliament’s Finance and Constitution Committee and from the hon. Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), so we have included one. The power to make a freezing regulation will lapse automatically two years after the Bill receives Royal Assent, and any regulation made under that power will have a maximum term—I stress “maximum”—of five years. Our intention is that they should not last as long as that.

Fourthly, the Scottish Parliament asked for the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998 to be protected, as the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is, from being modified under the deficiencies procedure in the Bill and, again, that is what we have done.

We now have a strictly time-limited power that applies only to a small number of policy areas returning from EU level. Where a framework freezes current powers for a short time, the situation will be exactly the same as it is now. We are not seeking, contrary to some suggestions in this debate, a power to change current EU rules; we seek a power to continue them for a maximum of five years while we sit down together and try to agree a long-term UK framework. As it is the Scottish National party’s declared objective either to stay in or to rejoin the European Union, it is hard to see why SNP Members should object to the continuation of EU rules, with which they are currently content.

In addition to far-reaching changes to the Bill itself, made in response to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber and others, we have given a binding political commitment, embodied in a formal intergovernmental agreement, to continue to apply the Sewel convention. Again that is something the Welsh and Scottish Governments specifically asked for in the negotiations, and we agreed to make the changes.

The IGA states the commitment of both the UK Government and the Welsh Government to proceed by agreement. It makes it clear that the Sewel convention will be fully respected, and we have made it clear that, despite the fact the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament have so far rejected a legislative consent motion, we will act in our future dealings with the Scottish authorities in the same way as we propose to act in relation to Wales, by observing in full the political commitments into which we have entered under the intergovernmental agreement.

I regret very much that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament did not agree to the package, in the way the Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly did. It is pretty fairly summed up by Mark Drakeford, the Welsh Minister who led the negotiations for the Welsh Government, when he said “the amended Bill, and the inter-governmental agreement that goes with it, does both things we set out to do. It safeguards devolution and it safeguards the future of a successful United Kingdom”.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port, the Labour party’s Front-Bench spokesman in the other place, said “everything that could have been done in areas where we have no precedent to appeal to has been done.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 14 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 1818.]

In answer to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), work is already under way on the detailed frameworks. My officials and the officials of the territorial Departments are working with devolved Government officials on that task, and of course he is right that we will have to take account of the views of industry, of farmers and of other interests.

I believe we have a good, balanced compromise package available, and what the people in all parts of the UK now expect is that their different Governments and different legislatures will work together constructively to represent them. That is what people expect, and that is what this Government want to deliver.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There are fewer than 24 minutes left and 10 speakers want to contribute. You can do the arithmetic for yourselves—a formal limit of three minutes, but if you speak for two and a bit, everybody should get in. Otherwise, people will not get in.

9.8 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is important in this debate that we distinguish between competences, which are a list of nominal responsibilities, and power, which is the ability to exercise change in those particular areas. I have no doubt in my mind that we are in the middle of a process that is seeing a major transfer of power from the devolved authorities of the United Kingdom to the centre. I caution the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) to look at the detail of what is happening, and not to be seduced by Conservative Members who say, “There is nothing to see here. Move on. Keep calm.”

The truth is that this is happening in two ways. First, a convention that has existed for 20 years is being torn up, which is extremely important because the genesis of the Sewel convention was to give assurance to those who wanted to believe that devolution actually meant something, that power would be exercised by the devolved authorities. The convention was there to say that it was not a matter of the Scottish Parliament making a decision that could be overridden. If we set the precedent where this is reversed, the situation is that it can be at any time in the future.

The second way in which power is being transferred is through the talk of joint arrangements. I am not against having joint arrangements—there are plenty of
opportunities where we should be co-ordinating things—but the devil is in the detail and the principles that the Government are putting forward are not fit for purpose. Let me illustrate that with an example. Imagine you have a committee that is to discuss farming policy. On that committee, Scottish farmers will be represented by the Scottish Government and Welsh farmers will be represented by the Welsh Government, but who will represent the interests of English farmers? It will be the United Kingdom Department. I think English farmers should have a say, but I do not think it is fair that the body that advocates for them should also sit as judge and jury if there is a difference of opinion in that committee. That is what is being proposed. That means that every time there is a difference of opinion the smaller party will lose out to the larger one. So if the Scottish Government want to take a policy on genetically modified crops, they could be overridden. If they want to take a policy on weighting subsidies for a cold climate, they could be overridden. On and on there is the opportunity to do that. That is what we mean by a power grab.

I believe in devolution. I tell the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that I was a member of the Scottish constitutional convention.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend rightly says that he believes in devolution. Are not the actions of the UK Government at the moment just the latest in a long pattern where the Conservatives have been against devolution? They have voted against it at every opportunity.

Tommy Sheppard: That is absolutely the case. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I do believe in devolution. I was a member of the Scottish constitutional convention that drew up the proposals, but I, like many people involved at that time, also respect the right of the Scottish people to become a self-governing nation if they so wish. It is disingenuous to say that, just because we support independence, that means that we are not genuine in our desire to protect devolution? They have voted against it at every opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I will take your admonishment and I will finish there, even though I have so much more to say.

Mr Speaker: I am sure you do. It was not admonition; I just want to accommodate colleagues.

9.11 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Let us consider the following: “Castigating the Tories for a ‘power grab’ of repatriated powers while acting like a fifth column for the EU in Scotland, has left the SNP in the ludicrous position of demanding powers from Theresa May that Nicola Sturgeon promises an independent Scotland will hand back to Jean-Claude Juncker.”

They are the words of Jim Sillars, the former deputy leader of the SNP, and as the current deputy leader is currently in the Chamber, it is appropriate to mention them. There is no such thing as a power grab here—it is a myth. The devolution settlement is not being undermined, overturned or dismantled. Devolution is not being destroyed by this process; it is being enhanced. Powers now held in Brussels are returning to Edinburgh and I, with the zeal of a convert to the principle of devolution, would not countenance anything less. My party in power has a proud track record of delivering more powers to the Scottish Parliament and safeguards are in place to ensure that the powers we are repatriating as we leave the EU flow to Edinburgh, to make our powerful Parliament even more powerful. I voted last week for more powers for our Parliament—the SNP voted against those new powers.

It would be good if the SNP in Edinburgh could even begin to get their arms around the powers they are already have and use them for the benefit of Scotland. They promised an independent Scotland in 18 months, but they cannot get to grips with social security powers passed to Holyrood until 2021. They say that they can create an independent Scotland for £400 million but they have budgeted £200 million to set up the Scottish social security system. They had to spend £180 million on a computer system to manage farm payments and still they are failing. But we are told there is a power grab and that, frankly, is gobsmacking.

Time is very much against me, so I wish to say just that I truly believe that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has the good will of the vast majority of the people of our country—by that, I mean Scotland. She has a difficult and complex task in hand, but she is being principled and pragmatic. We are leaving the European Union, the customs union and the single market, and this House should, if I may paraphrase the common sentiment of the people of Stirling, “Just get on with it”.

9.14 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate, and I thank the SNP group leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), for applying for it, but it comes too late, because Government MPs have already voted through clause 15 and it cannot now be amended, because of the way the procedures of this place work.

In Scotland, we believe that the people of Scotland are sovereign. In Westminster, this place, they believe that Parliament is sovereign, but that idea is currently being attacked. Only at the weekend, the Prime Minister said that Parliament cannot tie the hands of Government, but surely that is Parliament’s job. If Parliament cannot tie the hands of Government, it means that power is so far removed from where it should be. It should be with the people. The fundamental difference between the two countries is that we in Scotland believe in democracy and that decisions should rest with the people, not in the power of the Executive.

It is impossible to overstate the fundamental shift in the relationship between the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments caused by the UK Government’s actions last week. The Government talk about the Scottish Parliament being the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world; if it is the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world, yet its powers can be removed at the whim of the UK Government, I dread to think what the other Parliaments’ powers are like if they are less powerful than ours in Scotland.

Since I came to the House, I have been shocked by Westminster’s attitude to Scotland. As a Scottish nationalist Member, I was under the impression that Westminster
did not care very much for Scotland and tended to overrule the will of the Scottish people. I then came here and discovered that the Government do not even think about Scotland. They put forward legislation like the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we say, “What about Scotland,” and they look at us like a rabbit in headlights—like they are thinking, “What are you talking about?” They do not even consider the people of Scotland and the fact that we are a separate country with different views. We did not support Brexit.

What do the UK Government imagine that people outside this place think of their behaviour? Are they proud of their legacy? Are they proud of the fact that in years to come people will look back at the behaviour of this UK Government last week—at the fact that they did not even allow a debate on this matter—and see that in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in the face of the Scottish Parliament refusing legislative consent, they have pounded on anyway and taken powers in 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it said that Scotland was poised to benefit enormously from the single market. Apparently, that is now not to be the case. There is a really interesting part in it—rather dry to some, I admit—on parliamentary procedure. It says that it is often the case that there is insufficient time in its crowded schedule in Parliament for Scottish affairs. It also suggested that, from time to time, there are few opportunities for proper debate on Scottish issues.

Well, Mr Speaker, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The dogs in the street have even worked that one out. In reading Hansard at the time of the Secretary of State’s statement to the House, the then Member for Aberdeen South, Mr Robertson, said that the “dynamism” in the change of the Union is the only reason it survives. Well, they were wrong then, and they are wrong now.

It is hard to believe that the Secretary of State has laboured away for two years and this is what he has come up with. He looks to me a haunted figure, and so he might be, although he does have a spring in his step. Is it not quite remarkable that 11 of his Scottish colleagues have all turned up this evening presumably to eye up the poisoned chalice that is the Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, so he should feel like a haunted figure? He is a man whom I like and who has helped me on occasion. He has messed this up big time and I think that he knows that himself. Indeed, I also want to say to Scottish Conservative Members that they could learn something from the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and her so-called Brexit rebel colleagues. When they are conned by the Tories, what do we get from the Scottish Conservatives? Nothing but a supine approach to Parliament. On that basis, every one of them is qualified beyond belief to take up the position of the next Secretary of State for Scotland. This is a Government in search of an empire; Scotland will have no part in it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):

What happened last week was completely unacceptable, with deplorable antics from the Tories when it came to the time allowed for debate on one hand, and the counterproductive antics from the SNP, including walking out of this place in an orchestrated media stunt that further curtailed debate, on the other.

As the party that delivered devolution, Labour has been driving a sensible and constructive position throughout the process, exploring options to safeguard and improve the devolution settlement as we leave the EU. Only Labour has been working constructively to try to break the deadlock between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. We tabled amendments to clause 11 at every stage of the Bill, and the Tories voted them down every single time.

We started from a position where the UK Government wanted 111 powers to be reserved to Westminster following our withdrawal from the EU. We got this down to 24 powers, which was clearly a substantial improvement, but I also respect that this was not seen as good enough by the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament’s position, however, does not justify the SNP’s vote on Tuesday night. That was a vote for us to go back to the original position of 111 powers being reserved to Westminster. Can any SNP Members stand up in here today and defend that absurdity?

The blame for the mess we are in lies squarely at the door of the UK Government. They have taken us to the very brink of a constitutional crisis, despite repeated promises that clause 11 would be fixed in time for Members of this House to debate it. Both the UK Government and the SNP are perfectly intent on causing a constitutional crisis. It fits their narratives, with the Tories trying to sow division in order to secure the Unionist vote, and the SNP sowing division to appease its supporters and agitate for another independence referendum. The Tories have played directly into the SNP’s hands on this. We all know that the SNP are only interested in sowing division and talking about the constitution. The Tories’ complete inability to fix the mess that they created has allowed the SNP to claim that Scotland’s voice is not being heard. It is an absurdity. I urge the parties to seek compromise as a matter of urgency.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the time, I will be brief, which is not a phrase that my colleagues hear often.

Tonight’s debate has been important for devolution, for the future of Scottish governance and for the future governance of us all. But it has also been profoundly disappointing because, rather than make progress, we have simply demonstrated the problems that got us here in the first place—intransigence on both sides, with Members dug into positions, both pro and anti-devolution and pro and anti-Conservative.
The red mists of nationalism descend on both sides whenever devolution is discussed.

I have to disagree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman); it is not too late. We should perhaps listen to the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland and get back around the table. My party and I would like the opportunity to be taken to create an enduring dispute resolution procedure that would prevent us from coming to this stage again. We need a procedure to prevent us from getting to the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) described and which I have experienced—as I am sure many others in this House have—whereby constituents and businesses across the country ask us, “What will happen next?” and we have to say, “We don’t know.” Can we please abandon the positions and get on with finding a solution?

9.29 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My remarks have been very truncated, so I will simply say the following. What happened last week was a clear attempt to strangle Scotland’s voice: to put us back in our box; to silence Scotland’s Parliament; to ensure that we eat our cereal. We will not eat our cereal. We will stand up for Scotland. It is time that the Secretary of State for Scotland did the same, to be the voice of Scotland in the Cabinet, not a Tory apologist for Scotland. The Tories have precipitated this crisis, but they will learn one thing and they will learn it the hard way—in Scotland, Westminster does not carry the affection that the Scottish Parliament does. We will stand up for Scotland because the people of Scotland know that in Scotland they are sovereign.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 88, Noes 51.

Division No. 188] [9.30 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Audois, Peter
Andrew, Stuart
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Benyon, rh Richard
Bowie, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bryant, Chris
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Davies, Mims
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Foster, Kevin
Ganier, Mark
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Penrose, John
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quince, Will
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rudd, rh Amber
Shannon, Jim
Shelbrooke, Alec
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, rh Julian

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Brown, Alan
Bryant, Chris
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Dakin, Nic
Day, Martyn
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin
Edwards, Jonathan
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hanson, rh David
Harris, Carolyn
Hendry, Drew
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Jardine, Christine

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and Mike Freer

Tellers for the Noes:
Marion Fellows and David Linden

Question accordingly agreed to. Resolved.

That this House has considered the Sewel Convention.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for the debate we have had this evening. This is an important juncture in Scotland’s constitutional history. In the debate, I asked whether the Government would bring forward emergency legislation in order to respect the wishes of the Scottish Parliament. Moreover, we have now had a Division in the House in which a majority of Scottish MPs have voted to show their lack of acceptance of what has happened by voting against the motion, and once again, Scotland has been outvoted because Conservative MPs who were not in the debate came into the House and outvoted those sent here to represent the interests of Scotland. May I ask for your advice about what I may do to take forward this matter so that we can ensure the UK Government listen to the legitimate demands, through the Scottish Government, of the people of Scotland?
Mr Speaker: Nothing disorderly has happened this evening. If the right hon. Gentleman is asking what he can do, the answer is: persist through interrogation and argument. Knowing the right hon. Gentleman as I do, I know that he will require no further encouragement from me.

Acquired Brain Injury

9.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I beg to move.

That this House has considered acquired brain injury.

After the last three hours, I think the expression is—and now for something completely different.

For the past hour and a half, some of us English Members have endured watching the match—Tunisia 1: Spurs 2; I mean, England 2. It is a pleasure to be in the House, and we are very grateful to SNP Members for enabling us to watch the match.

I rise to speak to the motion in the name of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for their persistence at business questions and elsewhere, and for securing this debate in the House. Brain Injury Awareness Week took place last month, which makes today’s debate especially timely.

Let me first recognise the important work of organisations such as Headway and the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum in raising awareness and in providing information and support to those living with acquired brain injury and to their friends, families and carers. I know that some of them are with us this evening, and I thank them for their persistence during the family dispute we have had in the Chamber for the past three hours.

Acquired brain injury—ABI—is an injury that takes place after birth in an otherwise healthy brain. It includes traumatic brain injuries such as those caused by road traffic accidents, falls or assaults, and non-traumatic brain injuries related to illnesses or medical conditions, including meningitis, stroke or brain tumours. While prevalence estimates for ABI are quite hard to make, the number living with it is thought to be over 500,000 and could be as high as 1 million people. The total cost of brain injury in the UK has been estimated by our officials to be at least £1 billion per year.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about the cost of brain injuries. My constituent Stuart Tranter asked me to lobby the Government to put more money into brain tumour research, which has been very much the poor relation, and I have been successful. I congratulate the Government on having doubled that money since Tessa Jowell, who used to serve on the Opposition Benches and then went to the House of Lords, died. I am very grateful to the Minister and the Department for putting so much money into that much needed research.

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend. This is the first time I have been at the Dispatch Box since Baroness Jowell passed away. As I said during the debate when she was sitting in the Under Gallery with her lovely family, I did not know her well but the one time I met her I was left in no doubt about her determination on this subject. It is great that we are able to do so much. I pass on my condolences to Jess, her daughter, whom I have got to know a little, and her family. The trauma of the immediate is horrible and it goes on for a long time. Our thoughts are with them. I thank my hon. Friend for
what she has said. We will do well by Baroness Jowell, especially through the money that we will put into research to try to instigate new research projects, which have traditionally been thin on the ground in this area. We are hoping to stimulate the research market.

ABI can have a devastating impact on our constituents' lives; even minor head injuries can cause short-term impairment. Those surviving more severe injuries are likely to have complex long-term problems affecting their cognitive and functional ability, personality, close relationships and ability to return to any form of independent life.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) rose—

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) rose—

Steve Brine: Ladies first.

Caroline Lucas: Does the Minister share the concern raised with me by my Brighton constituents who travelled up to Westminster to share their stories, about the lack of funding for support for relatives and carers—in particular, the education that family members and carers need about how to look after someone with ABI? It can be incredibly stressful for the person themselves and for family members if people do not know how best to provide care. Funding can make a huge difference.

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, which I shall come to. There are other Ministers on the Bench with me, including from the Department for Work and Pensions, because I wanted them to hear other parts of this debate. The hon. Lady’s point is well made.

Alex Chalk: The Minister rightly listed a number of impacts from traumatic brain injury. Does he agree that one of those can be an increasing propensity to commit criminal offences? We are starting to wake up to the fact that a number of people in custody have sustained precisely that injury. That should be a focus for preventive work in future.

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend, who has professional experience of the criminal justice system. I shall come to his point in a moment, but I thank him for putting it on the record. Sometimes it is a difficult subject to talk about, but it is very relevant.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This debate is important to me personally; many years ago my brother had a serious brain injury as a result of racing motorbikes. That made an independent, single-minded person into someone who depended very much on others; it took him from being a person with his own business and social connections to being someone who could not co-ordinate more than one thing at a time.

I look forward to some comfort in the Minister’s response, which I know we will get. We need not only help for the person in an institution; they need to be taken home and given a semblance of order in their lives and what quality of life is possible. Does the Minister accept that families need help to take on that job for someone whom they love and want to help?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Minister responds, I should say that I appreciate that many want to make interventions because they do not want to stay until the end of the debate. We have only an hour and 10 minutes. A lot of people wish to make speeches and there will have to be a time limit. Interventions must be short.

Steve Brine: I do not know what you mean, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will certainly be here until 11 pm.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) makes a good point, which follows on neatly from the point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). It also leads me neatly on to the point I was about to make. The all-party group on ABI is currently conducting a very broad inquiry into the condition—its causes, treatments and societal impact—and I am sure it will consider the wider family. When I say family, I do not just mean the nuclear family but society’s family and even the Church, which can embrace people suffering the life change the hon. Gentleman spoke about so well with regard to his brother. I want the all-party group to know that I will support its inquiry as best I can. They should know that that offer is there.

As a Health Minister, I will obviously focus on the health aspects of ABI, but I just want to highlight some of the other areas—this touches on one or two of the interventions—where its impact is felt and action is under way. On education, many children and young people with ABI are rightly in education and have special educational needs as a result of their injuries. The Government recently provided some £29 million to support local authorities with ongoing implementation of individual education, health and care plans to meet those needs. It is vital to us that health, social care and education services work jointly in developing these care plans. I know my colleagues in the Department for Education share that view.

On offending behaviour—ABI touches on a lot of different Government Departments—there is an increasing body of evidence suggesting that children and young people who survive traumatic brain injury are more likely to develop behavioural problems that can be linked to an increased vulnerability to offend. NHS England’s liaison and diversion service has collaborated with the charity Headway, which I mentioned at the start of my speech, to improve awareness of ABI in vulnerable offenders and the support available—the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). Further, the Ministry of Justice is piloting approaches to improve screening and support for prisoners with ABI to prevent a cycle of re-offending once they enter the secure estate. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), is very kindly on the Government Front Bench to listen to the debate and I am grateful to her. The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who has responsibility for prisons, had hoped to be here but was pulled away. I know he will be taking a close interest in what is said tonight, because this issue will come up again.

Sport is another area for which there is a growing body of evidence and concern about the levels of risk and response to injury. This is why the Government commissioned an independent review of the duty of care that sport has to its participants, which published its findings in April 2017, and we are now working to
implement its recommendations, including around awareness and prevention of head injury while playing sport.

On trauma centres, it is vital that those with the most serious brain injuries receive the best care that our NHS—our birthday NHS—can offer. In 2012, 22 regional trauma networks were developed across England. Within those networks, major trauma centres provide specialised care for patients with multiple, complex and serious major trauma injuries, including brain injury. Two years after their introduction, an independent audit of the network, commissioned by NHS England, showed patients had a 30% improved chance of surviving severe injuries and that the networks had saved some 600 lives. There is a positive story there.

A vital part of the treatment pathway for people who have suffered ABI is neuro-rehabilitation that is timely and appropriate to their needs. There is good evidence that access to high quality rehabilitation both improves outcomes for patients and can save money.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The neuro-rehabilitation centre in Goole is an excellent example of such practice. It serves north Lincolnshire and the wider area. I commend that service, and others like it, to the Minister.

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope to get to his part of the world at some point while doing this job and it may be that I could visit it while I am up there.

The World Health Organisation states that rehabilitation intervention should be aimed at achieving the following five broad objectives: preventing the loss of function; slowing the rate of loss of function; improving or restoring function; compensating for lost function; and maintaining current function. NHS England’s Improving Rehabilitation programme applies those principles, rightly, in a holistic way to encompass both mental and physical health. In 2015, the programme published the “Principles and expectations for good adult rehabilitation” to support commissioners on delivering rehabilitation care locally in our constituencies. This document describes what good rehabilitation looks like and offers a national consensus on the services that we think people should expect.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is important that we consider that it is not just trauma with regard to ABI. One of the other causes might be excessive exposure to carbon monoxide, so I was grateful to the support that Headway gave to my private Member’s Bill, which seeks to introduce mandatory carbon monoxide detectors in new-build and social rented houses.

Steve Brine: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As I said at the start, obviously there are non-traumatic injuries—so, through conditions, and meningitis and stroke were two examples that I gave—but he is absolutely right to point out that issue. I congratulate him on his success with his Bill.

The rehabilitation programme includes 10 principles and expectations that were designed by people who use rehabilitation services—the carers, healthcare professionals, commissioners, strategic clinical networks and national clinical directors. Building on this, in 2016, NHS England published further rehabilitation guidance covering both adults and children. This provides local service planners with a commissioning model, a range of case studies and crucially, an evidence base for the economic benefits of delivering high-quality rehabilitation services.

While the vast majority of rehabilitation care is locally provided, NHS England commissions specialised rehab services for those patients with the most complex levels of need. Teams within trauma units assess and develop a rehabilitation prescription for patients with ABI. Through this, patients can access specialists in rehabilitation medicine, whose expert assessment helps to inform the prescription. The teams manage ongoing patient care, including a key worker to support patients through the pathway and into rehabilitation at a level appropriate to their clinical need, in accordance with their clinician’s advice—be that highly specialised rehabilitation or through a local provider in the local network.

I want to mention the Rehab Matters campaign. As I said, rehabilitation is a key part of the patient’s recovery. I saw at first hand the impact that this can have in helping people to recover from illness or injury when I visited the Hobbs rehabilitation centre in my Winchester constituency earlier this year. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy launched its Rehab Matters campaign here in the House at the end of October last year. It makes a very powerful case for community rehabilitation, and I think that all commissioners should ensure that levels of provision are meeting local needs and look to places such as the Hobbs centre as a good example of what can be achieved through rehabilitation care. The society produced a film that was made by the Oscar-nominated UK director, Chris Jones, called “Rehab Matters”, and I highly recommend it to Members interested in this area.

I am just going to skip over to research, and then close, because we have only an hour and I know that a lot of people want to speak. Let me just highlight the research being undertaken in this important area. We are investing over £1 billion a year in health research through the National Institute for Health Research. The NIHR is funding ABI research from basic science to translational research in civilians, military and sport. For example, we are investing over £100 million, over five years up to 2022, in a biomedical research centre in Cambridge that is developing new approaches to reduce the impact on patients’ health and wellbeing of neurological disorders, stroke and brain injury. We are investing £5 million to co-fund the surgical reconstruction and microbiology centre in partnership with the Ministry of Defence—that has been going since 2011. The centre specialises in research, taking discoveries from the military frontline to improve outcomes for all. We have invested about £16 million in brain injury research since 2014 through the NIHR health technology assessment programme, and we are investing just over £2 million over three years through NIHR’s global health research group on neurotrauma, which aims to advance global neurotrauma care and research to help to save lives, reduce disability from the trauma and improve the quality of life for patients with brain injury.

I fully recognise the devastating impact that acquired brain injuries can have on individuals and their families. The evidence shows that people with acquired brain injuries are not an invisible workforce, but a false economy. Rehabilitation equips people to live their lives, fulfil their potential and optimise their contribution to their family, their community and society as a whole.
I am honoured to have introduced this debate and, as always in such debates, I look forward to hearing the views and insights from across the House on what further work or support is needed to reduce risk and improve the care available.

10 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15),
That, at this day’s sitting, proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to acquired brain injury may continue, though opposed, until 11.00 pm.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
Debate resumed.
Main Question again proposed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Minister.

Steve Brine: I had finished, Madam Deputy Speaker. Incredibly, it was timed to perfection.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I beg the Minister’s pardon. I have never before heard such a feat of perfect rhetoric. Thank you for being so perfect. [Interruption.]. Yes, it was quite unusual.

10.1 pm
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is now in Hansard. I am sure the Minister will enjoy it in the months and years to come.

It is an honour to speak in this very important debate, and I thank the Government for allowing the time for it. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for calling it for and for his tenacity in ensuring it went ahead, against all the odds, when we all doubted it would and even though we are very pushed for time. I thank the all-party group on acquired brain injury and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for all their work and for their excellent campaign for better support and recognition for people living with ABI. I join the Minister in praising the work of the late and great Baroness Jowell. I, too, will never forget her last appearance in this Chamber in the Under Gallery.

Last month, along with colleagues from across the House, I was pleased to attend the rally for people with acquired brain injury at which they, along with their families, friends and carers, talked about their conditions and the services available to them. As we have heard, 1.3 million people in the UK live with the consequences of ABI, and each year approximately half a million patients attend UK emergency departments for traumatic brain injury. That is nearly 1,500 patients with traumatic brain injury attending A&E departments in the UK each day; one every minute. Brain injury can happen to anyone at any time, and all Members will have constituents living with the consequences of an ABI.

Despite the fact that so many people are living with ABI, it is little understood, which is why I am so pleased that the time has been allowed to discuss it in this place this evening. A brain injury can happen in an instant, but its effects can be devastating and last a lifetime. Thankfully, due to excellent advances in emergency and acute medicine, more and more children, young people and adults now survive and live with an ABI, but this brings its own challenges. As ever more people survive an ABI, further pressure is put on the vital services that people require.

For example, many individuals with an ABI require early and continued access to neuro-rehabilitation to optimise their recovery. The United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum says that the average cost of the initial rehabilitation programme is offset by savings in the cost of ongoing care within just 16 months and that this leads to an average saving over a lifetime in care costs of £1,475,760. That is a huge amount of money. Neuro-rehabilitation is therefore one of the most cost-effective services the NHS provides and one of the few services in medicine that result in long-term decreased costs to the economy. However, as is the case for many health conditions, the number of available beds across the UK is inadequate, service provision is variable and consequently long-term outcomes for brain injury survivors are compromised. What plans do the Government have to address those issues and improve the lives of patients living with an ABI? The UKABIF recommends a review of neuro-rehabilitation to ensure that service provision is adequate and consistent throughout the UK. Does the Minister agree that that is needed?

Many children and young people with an ABI are in education, and therefore the majority will receive most of their rehabilitation at school. Yet among education professionals there is a lack of awareness and understanding of ABI, its consequences, and its impact on learning. A pupil with an ABI may also require extra support when transitioning between primary, secondary and further education. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure that children with an ABI receive the support that they need throughout their journey through the education system? Will he discuss with them the inclusion of ABI in the code of practice for special educational needs co-ordinators?

Brain injuries can be difficult to detect for people who are not already aware of them, which is why all education professionals should have a minimum level of awareness and understanding of ABI. In fact, that requirement goes beyond education and into everyday life. People living with ABI are discriminated against because of the general lack of understanding of their condition. For example, earlier this year Grace Currie was escorted out of a pub on a Saturday night because the bouncers believed that she was “too drunk”. In fact, Grace, who had suffered life-changing injuries after being hit by a car in 2010, had had just one drink. The incident must have been extremely upsetting and embarrassing for Grace, and I am sure that it really knocked her confidence.

Sadly, such encounters are not rare, and the level of misunderstanding of brain injuries is high among the general public, including assessors for employment and support allowance and personal independence payments. A study conducted by Headway found that 71% and 60% of respondents felt that assessors for ESA and PIP, respectively, did not have an understanding of brain injury. Further, assessors were widely reported to lack empathy and patience, resulting in a stressful and even traumatic experience for many brain injury survivors. Many respondents also said that their medical evidence
was not taken into consideration, and that the assessment location and environment were not suitable for them, despite requests made in advance. Consequently, a strong sense of frustration and anxiety was reported by brain injury survivors and their carers about the failure to recognise or respect their needs throughout the application process. Has the Minister had any discussions with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about that issue? Will he look into those concerns with his colleagues, and ensure that they are properly addressed?

Living with a brain injury is difficult enough for people without their having to struggle to explain and prove their disability to anyone who lacks understanding of the condition. Each brain injury is different, which is why it is so important to raise awareness of ABI. However, it is also important to recognise that such injuries affect not just the people directly concerned, but their families and friends. Headway aimed to highlight that during brain injury week last month for its “you, me, and brain injury” campaign. Headway found that 69% of brain injury survivors reported breakdowns in their relationships after the injury, and that 28% of relationships ended after an ABI. However, it is not all doom and gloom: 47% of survivors reported improvements in their relationships with family members. It was clear from Headway’s study that a little bit of understanding and time really can go a long way. That is the kind of service that is provided by its 127 groups and branches across the country.

Headway Wearside, whose representatives I met recently at the rally in Parliament, provides information, support and social activities for brain injury survivors, and works with the local community, relevant professionals and organisations to promote understanding of ABI. I spoke to Neil and Jimmy, who use the Headway Wearside service, and was touched when they explained that Headway had brought them together as a community, and they had formed friendships that they never expected to form. Headway Wearside does not just teach new skills, but helps people to form and develop friendships at a time when doing so might otherwise be hard. When I met with Neil and Jimmy we feared that this service might soon be lost, and I am pleased to say that it has been extended to June 2019, and I hope it will be extended still further so that patients can have access to this life-changing service. I pay tribute to Headway Wearside and the other 126 across the country, and I will continue to support it so that this vital service can continue to support its 4,000 patients.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My wife suffered exactly this problem in 1999. The eldest of my three children was sitting her exams—her higher—at school, and while that school and the education system in general supported them fantastically well, there is the issue of supporting the children, quite apart from supporting the sufferer of an injury like this. Will the hon. Lady elaborate on how we might increase the support to families in the position his family was in, and he is right to mention the children of people with acquired brain injuries; they must not be forgotten in all of this.

Unfortunately, not every patient with an ABI will have access to a service like Headway Wearside. If the Minister is to take away one thing from this debate, I urge him to recognise the need for services such as Headway Wearside and the other 126 across the country, so that the more than 1 million people living with a brain injury can access the support they need and deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to have a time limit, initially of five minutes.

10.11 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I do not make a habit of exorcising personal demons in this Chamber and I am not going to start now, but we are all shaped, and are certainly affected, when we are shocked by what we see, perhaps in our constituencies or other people, and so it was almost 40 years ago when I was in hospital and in the bed next to me was a young man, I suppose in his 20s or 30s, surrounded by a family—young children, his wife—being taught to feed himself and speak again following a traumatic event which had led to a severe head injury. He was a postman; he had slipped on the ice and hit his head on the pavement. As simple an event as that had changed that man’s and that family’s life for all of time.

From then on I became interested in ABI, and when I was elected to this place began my relationship with Headway, which has continued ever since. I am proud to be associated with the work it does and am delighted to endorse all that has been said by both Front Benchers about that work.

That postman all those years ago has, sadly, been followed by many others. Not always such a simple event has led to their injury; it is often a car or motorbike accident or something of that kind, which is why it is disproportionately young men who are affected by traumatic injuries of this type. But the results are common; they are complex and varied, but common themes emerge.

The first theme is of course the immediate, traumatic effect—invariably dealt with efficiently and effectively by the national health service. Those who have that kind of dramatic injury get pretty good treatment from our NHS, and it deserves credit, as do all those associated with it, for providing that treatment. But the ongoing issues associated with ABI are met with various kinds of responses. Sometimes the follow-up care is good, strong and effective, but that is not always the case because of the need to continue to respond to what are often rapidly changing circumstances. People’s speed of recovery can vary, as can the effect of their injury on their life, their competence and their skills.

In this very welcome debate—for which I was pleased to call, alongside the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant); we have worked as a team; I am delighted that the Government have offered us this time—I want to argue for a number of simple things, which I will summarise. Co-ordination: we need to ensure that all the agencies—charitable, Government and local government—
work together. Perpetuation: we need to understand that the condition might require care and treatment over a very long time. It is a dynamic condition and it needs that kind of perpetuation. Accentuation: we need to drive this issue up in the consideration of all public policy makers and those who make policy in the health service in particular. Having this debate is all about that. Concentration: we need to pool resources and target them where they can have the greatest effect. Accumulation: we need to build on the experience of the Headway groups and others that do this best. The NHS looked at this issue in 2004, and its international studies—particularly relating to the United States of America—need to be revisited.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was right to say that knowledge is vital. To get people back into work, which is often their aim, we need to work on educators and employers to enable them to understand that the pathways that people follow need to be attuned to their complex and changing needs. If we can achieve all that, we will be sending a signal to all those people affected, as that postman was that. Concentration: we need to pool resources and target them where they can have the greatest effect. Accumulation: we need to build on the experience of the Headway groups and others that do this best. The NHS looked at this issue in 2004, and its international studies—particularly relating to the United States of America—need to be revisited.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was right to say that knowledge is vital. To get people back into work, which is often their aim, we need to work on educators and employers to enable them to understand that the pathways that people follow need to be attuned to their complex and changing needs. If we can achieve all that, we will be sending a signal to all those people affected, as that postman was all that time ago that, in the words of C. S. Lewis: "You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream"; regardless of the misfortunes you might suffer.

10.17 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. I worked in the NHS as a psychologist for many years, and I was involved in carrying out assessments of people who had acquired brain injuries. This is often a hidden disability. I would describe it as invisible much of the time and that contributes to much of the discrimination. It can have a major impact on people’s cognition, their personality—particularly if it is a frontal lobe injury—and their planning ability. It can have an impact on individuals’ speech. Some have to relearn vocabulary and the names of people they once knew. In severe cases, it can have a significant impact on someone’s memory. Consequent to all that is the impact on people’s mental health and their confidence.

I pay tribute to the agencies that work so hard with those individuals and their families, because a systematic and systemic family approach is what is needed to support individuals. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is absolutely right in that regard, as he is in so many others. It is important to provide support to all members of the family. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has played a crucial role in bringing this debate to the House. He is vociferous on this important issue, and he has again made sure that we have time to debate it.

My own husband suffered a head injury when he was serving in the armed forces many years ago, when his tank was overturned. He was a member of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and is now a local veterans’ spokesperson. He was fortunate to have fast, intense rehabilitation. It is important that that is provided not only to those in the armed forces, but to the general population. I am interested in what the Minister has to say about medical spending on our veterans and their access to rehabilitation services in this regard, alongside our NHS trauma units.

There are also difficulties in relation to welfare benefit assessments, particularly for employment and support allowance and for personal independence payments. Those with an acquired brain injury often feel that their difficulties are not understood and not well assessed under the current procedures, so we need not only further training for assessors, but possibly to review the assessment process itself. Assessment sometimes does not pick up the fine changes that can have such a crucial impact on the daily living skills of people with an acquired brain injury. Support will be necessary because it can be difficult for those with such injuries to complete forms, gather adequate evidence and so on. The Minister for Disabled People is in her place this evening, so I will be grateful if she will meet with me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, to discuss that further.

Jamie Stone: Does the hon. Lady agree that there is some evidence that the mobility aspect of PIP is not being recognised in this regard?

Dr Cameron: Yes, that is a fair point. Mobility is about not just how far someone can walk, but being able to plan a journey and many other aspects of day-to-day living skills that people can find so difficult. People may require support for such things, but that may not currently be picked up properly by an assessment.

Psychology is important in the assessment of such cases, because access to neuropsychology means that individuals can have memory and cognitive assessments at the time of injury and six and 12 months later to examine which functions have been recovered. That is important because different parts of the brain can take on functions that have been lost and because the individual’s pattern of recovery can be mapped, meaning that a rehabilitation plan can be specifically adapted to their needs. Access to neuropsychology is a key part of rehabilitation, so I will be interested to hear the comments of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on neuropsychology services, particularly for those with an acquired brain injury.

Prisoners have been mentioned. Yes, there is a high level of acquired brain injury within the population and that has an impact in three ways: acquired brain injuries can increase impulsivity, they can lead to people making the wrong decisions and not thinking through the consequences, and they can lead to difficulty in undertaking the normal treatments available in prisons, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, meaning that such treatments may have to be adapted for prisoners to benefit from them. I am unsure whether that is occurring in our prison system, but it should happen right across the United Kingdom if cognisance is taken of such difficulties.

Mr John Hayes: This will be my last contribution because I know that others want to get in. The change in a person’s cognitive function, which is often perceived as a change in their ability to do things, is often also about them knowing how to do things, what to do, when to do it and why. That is different from losing a skill. It is about losing the ability to order things and to prioritise them, and that has a dramatic effect both on education and on their subsequent ability to work.

Dr Cameron: Individuals with a frontal lobe injury find planning extremely difficult and, in fact, may never again be able to plan in the way they once could.
These are some of the issues that treatment would have to take on board, and perhaps further support will be required. The types of cognitive behavioural treatment that rely on people thinking things through in a sequence, which is particularly difficult for those with a brain injury, will not always be appropriate and may need to be adapted.

So many Members want to speak on this important issue, so I will finish by mentioning the funding for a new Scottish trauma network. Since January 2017, four major trauma centres, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee, have been working extremely hard to try to ensure a good care pathway for those in Scotland who suffer brain injury. It is incumbent on us all to communicate and to find evidence-based practice right across the United Kingdom.

10.25 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): As a local councillor, I had the privilege of sitting on the board of Headway Ayrshire, which is affiliated with Headway UK, the brain injury association, a registered charity. Headway Ayrshire is based in the town of Ayr in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, and it provides services to the population of Ayrshire and Arran. Its invaluable work includes the provision of information, advice and support services to people with brain injuries, their families and carers.

Up to December 2017, approximately 420 clients and 320 carers and family members were receiving support from Headway Ayrshire, with, on average, 60 referrals per annum. We have heard in this debate that acquired brain injuries may result from sports injuries, violent crimes, road traffic accidents or industrial accidents. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) mentioned, a simple slip, trip or fall can change the life of a person and their family for years to come.

During my 30 years in the fire and rescue service, attending road traffic collisions and cutting the occupants free from crashed vehicles, I saw the trauma at first hand. However, I acknowledge that vehicle manufacturers are constantly evolving, changing and improving in-built safety measures such as simple seatbelts, side-impact bars and not least, and more recently, airbags, which all assist in a good recovery from road traffic accidents and road traffic collisions.

I call on the Government to consider or, indeed, to address a few specific issues. First, I call on them to ensure that those assessing claimants on behalf of the DWP understand that, given the nature of their injury, the sufferer may lack personal awareness and may be under misconceptions as to their own capabilities. The sufferer may believe they will return to normality, for when they look in the mirror they still see their former self. To the onlooker, the sufferer may not present with overt symptoms, and often their life challenges are covert in nature. A sufferer may be asked whether they are able to learn a new task, and their answer might be yes. However, given an inability in some cases to retain and recall information, the fact is that the next time they are asked to undertake such a task, they may have genuinely forgotten how to do it. Appropriate questioning on forms and at assessments and hearings is crucial.

For cases where the maximum recovery point has been reached, according to medical opinion, will the Government consider making long-term awards, as completing application forms is challenging for persons who lack concentration skills and who fatigue easily?

Secondly, I call on the Government to ensure that the NHS is able to offer the crucial multi-disciplinary support from an NHS team that is required in many of these cases, to provide ongoing rehabilitation and to recognise that a person’s treatment plan may need to be bespoke, with acquired brain injuries, it is not a case of one size fits all. The symptoms and challenges faced by a sufferer have changing dynamics throughout their life. Professor Diane Playford, president of the British Society of Rehabilitation Medicine, has stated that there are not enough specialist rehabilitation facilities for those with brain injuries. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) mentioned the four additional centres in Scotland, and I congratulate and thank the staff at the Douglas Grant centre in Irvine, operated by NHS Ayrshire and Arran, on the good work they undertake every single day.

Thirdly, we should recognise the dedication of family members who do not necessarily see themselves as carers but who undoubtedly, through their own personal efforts, lighten the burden on our social care services and the NHS. This dedication on their part can lead to their own social isolation because brain injuries tend to have cognitive, physical, behavioural and emotional consequences that have an impact not just directly on the sufferer, but indirectly on the carer or the family members.

We also need to reach out to employers to ask them to consider engaging with the Government’s Disability Confident Scheme, to think about the potential to retain and, if necessary, retrain employees who have sustained acquired brain injuries and to think about these people when considering new employees. Fortunately, many make a good recovery from acquired brain injuries, but for others life becomes a constant challenge—for them and their family. As a Government and as a society, let us do all we can to assist those who have sustained an acquired brain injury.

10.30 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The truth is that acquired brain injury is an invisible epidemic in this country. It is invisible because all too often we do not even know the numbers. I know the Minister means well, but I suspect his numbers were a hideous underrepresentation of the truth, because the figures I have seen suggest that there are more like 1.3 million people in this country living with a disability brought on by an acquired brain injury, with nearly half a million presenting to hospital last year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, that is one a minute—1,500 a day. That is a very significant number of people. All too often, it feels like an invisible epidemic to the individual concerned, because they might not ever have known they had a brain injury in the first place.

Some of the most distressing work that I have seen has been done by people working in prisons. I was in Cardiff prison a couple of weeks ago—some would say not a moment too soon—to see the work being done...
there with prisoners, because the work Huw Williams has done at HMP Leeds showed that when we screened every prisoner arriving in through the door we found that 77% of prisoners had an acquired brain injury, that 76% of those had several and that 30% of those had more than five brain injuries. This is often invisible in the case of children, too. The latest figures I have seen show that five children in every primary school class in this country will have an acquired brain injury. If we think that figure is bad enough, the figure for poorer constituencies, and for poorer families and areas, will be considerably higher. The research is a bit difficult to be precise about, but a study in Exeter showed that it was 4.3 times higher in poorer areas, and another survey elsewhere found it was three times higher in poorer families. So, for me, as a socialist—I still like to use the word—this is still a matter of social justice as much as anything else.

Mr John Hayes: As a non-socialist and member of the party of Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Disraeli, I believe in social justice, too. The key thing that the hon. Gentleman has said, as did the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), is that we have to get teachers to be more aware of this. If one thing comes out of this debate, it should be exactly that. We need to co-ordinate across Departments to get teachers to recognise and know this.

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman on that, not least because of one thing that sometimes happens to teenagers. Part of their brains will be quite well developed—the reward bit, the one that knows how to seek out pleasure—but the area of the brain most likely to be hit if they have a brain injury is the bit that is not yet well developed, which is the executive function. It is the bit that gives that youngster the ability to say no to things or to control their emotions and their functions. All too often, if that bit goes wrong, they can start to present in school as somebody who is a problem. They may then get excluded from the school, because it is not understood that this is actually about a brain injury—perhaps the student themselves does not understand that. They may then start offending and we may find several years later that they have a whole career of offending and that if we had managed to do the rehab properly right at the beginning, when the first brain injury happened, we might have been able to save that individual their self-respect and self-esteem, and we might have been able to save society the costs of all the criminality. We might, thus, be able to strengthen the whole of the way we do our business.

One memory that really strikes me is the story of Ben Robinson, the 14-year-old who was playing rugby for Carrickfergus Grammar School in Northern Ireland. He was sent back on to the field three times after brain injuries on the field and then died of double impact syndrome. He was pronounced dead when he arrived at the hospital. I am so proud of Ben’s family, who have campaigned on this issue. His mother, Karen, has always referred to these injuries as rugby’s dirty secret.

Rugby has tried to clean up its act in recent years, but in so many sports, even all these years after footballer Jeff Astle’s brain injury, which was determined to have been an industrial injury brought on by heading the ball, we still see in matches people being sent back on by the club medic. Only an independent medic should make the decision about whether somebody should go back on. If there is any doubt, sit them out. It should be simple and that should apply across all sports.

The Government have had a great success thanks to the major trauma centres which, as somebody said earlier, now manage to save an extra 600 lives every year. That is brilliant, but let us save the quality of their life as well. The miracles that can be achieved in saving lives can be matched by the miracles that can be achieved through really good, long-term, sustained rehabilitation. If we can take an 18-year-old who has had a big brain injury from needing six carers to wash, dress and feed them and get them up and so on, to a place where they no longer depend on those people, are mostly independent and need only one carer, think how many millions of pounds we can save the taxpayer across their lifetime. That must of course be the most effective way to change things.

I repeat the points made about PIP and ESA. One woman said to me, “The doctors say to me that I should spend all my emotional energy on getting my brain to work again, but I am spending all my emotional energy on trying to understand the forms and going through the process so that I can put food on the table for the rest of my family.”

I have a great deal of time for the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work; she has had meetings with me and I know that she will want to make changes. This is about the whole of Government. I very much hope that we will be able to have another debate soon, because there are so many issues that we have barely managed to touch on in this one.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am reducing the time limit to four minutes.

10.36 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I welcome this opportunity to speak briefly on such an important topic that affects a number of my constituents, either personally or through their family and friends. I echo the sentiment that has already been expressed about the great work that is done by charities such as Headway that focus on acquired brain injuries.

As we have heard, every year 1.5 million people attend A&E with a head injury, and some 200,000 of them are hospitalised. That is why it is so important not only that A&E training in the detection of brain injuries is up to date, but that there is strong public awareness of the symptoms, to ensure that help is sought immediately. Equally, that is why we must continue to invest in research so that we can detect earlier and treat more effectively.

The key point that I wish to make is that brain injuries affect all aspects of a person’s life. They are not only an issue for the NHS, because they also have massive implications for a person’s social care, eligibility for employment and disability benefits, ability to navigate the judicial system, and education, to name but a few. That is why cross-departmental working is so vital and why the support, available and knowledge of it is so crucial, as is increasing general awareness, especially given the fact that every acquired brain injury is so different.
For example, I have a constituent who has been able to work a number of hours with a severe acquired brain injury and is on universal credit. However, when an error was made, a request for back-payment was issued. A factual letter was sent, but it was an inappropriate letter to send to someone with a severe brain injury. It caused great distress, and it would have been better had a personal approach been taken. I pick that up with the Minister because that could and should have been done. We also need to get individuals and families to volunteer the information to work coaches and those sectors that need it, which is why I welcome the roll-out of communities partners. That will help to facilitate that work up and down the country.

I praise the investment in the network of well-resourced major trauma centres that have been established since 2012. Treating severe and complex brain injuries is a highly specialised area and requires dedicated personnel and equipment. There are now 27 of these centres in England alone. These are the point of use, specialised centres are predicted to save over 600 more lives a year. They are an example of the NHS at its best and highlight why protecting the NHS is so important. Censor such as these are why I welcomed the funding announcement today to give more than £20 billion extra in real terms to the NHS by 2023-24.

The NHS is not a national treasure because of nostalgia, but because it saves our families and our friends. I end my remarks by reiterating how important the work of local charities is and by stressing the great contribution that those suffering from acquired brain injuries make to our communities, our workplaces and our charities.

10.40 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a privilege to speak in this debate today. I often think how lucky I am to be able to continue speaking in this House at all. I was incredibly lucky because, when I fell off a ladder onto a wooden block in my attic in a classic case of what not to do around the home—I was 8 feet off the ground and my head 14 feet off the ground—I did not suffer a brain bleed. I was profoundly lucky to be in a job with a support system around me and with wonderful staff who were able to take the load from me for a full two years. At first, I was not able to work much at all except in very small bursts. I slowly built that up, but I had to resign from the Front Bench. I often think how the history of these past few years might have been different had I remained a shadow roads Minister under the then Leader of the Opposition.

In listening to these moving accounts from across the Chamber, I have found so many of them to ring true. My personality changed—largely for the better in many ways—but I became much less risk averse in a way that was not healthy. I suffered from depression. As I was recovering, I was not able to spend time with my small children. My marriage broke down, and I could work only for very small amounts of time. I feel so lucky, because there are so many people whose employment circumstances would not allow that at all and who would not have the system around them. I was lucky because I was able to understand the system and to ask for the best care. I eventually was referred to the best care in the NHS and I got it and I have pretty much been able to make a full recovery. My family will tell me what a nightmare I am whenever I try to find something because my short-term recall, which was never good in the first place, will never come back to even the mediocre place that it was in before.

I want to finish by saying that, yes, we should be so proud of the positive role that the NHS can play, but it is not the case that everyone receives good care when they acquire a brain injury. I am not saying this to complain, but it is important to state what happened. I was given great care by paramedics who thought that my back could be broken when I fell off the ladder. All the tests were done. I was very, very sore. When I was released the next day, I was not even given a leaflet to say, “Look out, here are the symptoms of a head injury.”

I thought that concussion was something that lasted for 24 to 48 hours. After a couple of weeks, I found that I still could not really work, except for very short 30 to 90 second bursts, I went back to my GP who said, “You have a stressful job and a young child. I think you are suffering from stress.” I said, “No, I’ve worked for Gordon Brown; I know what stress is. This is not stress.” It was only because I was able to push and because he had a personal relationship with the lead neurologist for the area that he picked up the phone and I was seen. So many people do not have that. I congratulate both my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for securing this debate and Headway on the recovery that it has given and on spreading awareness of this condition, which we have to keep on raising to ensure that people get the care that they need.

10.44 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am glad to be able to take part in this important debate.

Over the past few months, I have had the pleasure of taking part in the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I confess that I first joined what was then a new group at the request of a constituent and friend who works with the charity Headway in the north-east. He was keen that the problems faced by people with an acquired brain injury should be properly and thoughtfully considered, and for action plans to be devised that would seek to help resolve those problems. It was only during the course of the meeting that I had one of those lightbulb moments, realising that one of my family members actually has an acquired brain injury. That is a classic example of one of the difficulties faced by many people with an acquired brain injury; it can be an invisible disability that is not recognised.

This evening I will talk about the issues facing children with acquired brain injury, particularly in education, which was one of the topics on which the APPG heard evidence. Department of Health data shows that in a four-year period, 39,000 under five were admitted to hospital because of falls. Many of these children will be discharged as fully recovered, although the outcome of traumatic brain injuries in children may not become clear until their brain is fully matured. In fact, despite the early years being a key point in brain development, it is also the time when children are most vulnerable to injury. Sadly, it is also the least supported age group.
The APPG heard from the Child Brain Injury Trust in one of our meetings that children are very different from adults after acquired brain injury, because their brains are still developing and will continue to do so until they are in their mid-20s. This means that the full extent of their injuries and subsequent difficulties may not be realised until their brains have fully matured. Up to 70% of children and young people return to mainstream education following their injury.

As we heard in the APPG, in common with many other groups there is a lack of interim access to rehabilitation, whether residential or in the community—community being the main issue for children and young people—so schools and teachers are the main source of rehab for these young folk. Unfortunately those teachers, including special educational needs co-ordinators and educational psychologists, do not have access to training in how to deal with children returning to school with acquired brain injury. Of course, we know about the pressure that teachers already face in their work. Many young people do not have a formal diagnosis of acquired brain injury, so they can be misdiagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum or as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. This can be a real detriment to their outcomes and future development.

It is not just at school that children and young people face problems. In the family, the emotional and psychological impact of an ABI can completely change their world. They often face a lack of services in the community, isolation, and a lack of access to funding support and information. They may also be unable to access counselling. They are balanced between child and adolescent mental health services and other non-neurological services, as specialist neurological specialist for children are scarce. Where people live matters; there are few areas of excellence, with the excellent services mostly based around major trauma units.

I could say a great deal more, but I will cut my speech short in view of the time limit. I will just finish by saying that our children deserve better than what they have at present. Children with an acquired brain injury need to have their condition recognised, and need to be supported to do the best they can at school and to improve their life outcomes. I hope that this debate will help to raise awareness, and lead to positive improvements for them and other people with acquired brain injury.

10.48 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I rise as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury.

Julian John, a dear friend and constituent of mine, is living with an acquired brain injury—an injury that led him to change his entire life path several years ago. He could have allowed his injury to dictate his life but he did not, and instead used his experience to help others to live fulfilling lives and gain meaningful employment. Every day Julian must overcome obstacles due to his ABI, such as being easily disorientated by doors or stairs. Simply entering a building or climbing stairs can be a massive task for him. But Julian advocates for the inclusion of people living with such disabilities and is an excellent example of how disability—whether visible or hidden—should not hold people back from reaching their full potential. He has used his experience to start the human resources company Delson, which specialises in inclusion.

Julian has had excellent support throughout his rehabilitation—all the love, support and patience he needed—but this is not true for all the 1.3 million people in the UK living with an acquired brain injury. Many of these individuals require early and continued access to neuro-rehabilitation to optimise their recovery, but the number of available beds across the UK is inadequate. Service provision is variable, and this means that long-term outcomes for brain injury survivors are compromised. There is a large variation in the provision of and access to neuro-rehabilitation services across the country, and a lack of neuro-rehabilitation personnel. Can the Minister assure us that a full review of neuro-rehabilitation services will be carried out? In doing so, he will ensure that more people will have the same opportunity that Julian had to make life after an ABI productive and meaningful.

10.50 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, and I thank all Members for their contributions. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), whose persistence week after week has undoubtedly facilitated the debate. I thank the Government for allowing it time.

Although we have first-class acute care in this country, and advances in medicine in recent years that have resulted in many more lives being saved following a brain injury, it is undoubtedly in long-term rehabilitation where much more support is required in order to save and preserve the quality of lives for those suffering from acquired brain injuries—and, of course, their loved ones. Somebody who has suffered a traumatic brain injury could have had three months in intensive care, six months in therapy, and maybe a year in residential care, and then they are often sent home and the help stops. Quite often personalities will have been affected, and the person who comes home could barely resemble the one before the accident or incident that led to the acquired brain injury.

A report by the Centre for Mental Health stated that 1.3 million people live with the effects of brain injury, at a cost to the UK economy of £15 billion per annum, based on premature death, the health and social care required, and lost work contributions and continuing disability. This cost is the equivalent of 10% of the annual NHS budget.

Chris Bryant: Two suggestions have been made about rehabilitation that might change things: first, that we should have a rehabilitation prescription just like a medical prescription so that the person knows, and the family know, what support there is going to be on an ongoing basis; and secondly, that every single major trauma centre should have a rehabilitation consultant, because one in four do not. Is that not essential to be able to make sure that we change this world?

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for those suggestions, and I hope that Minister will respond to them. It is clear that my hon. Friend cares very much about this issue.
Neuro-rehabilitation is one of the most cost-effective services that the NHS provides, and one of the few services in medicine that results in long-term decreased costs to the economy. However, the number of available beds across the UK is inadequate, service provision is variable, and consequently long-term outcomes for brain injury survivors are compromised.

ABIs can result from many different causes, including stroke, tumour or brain haemorrhage. They can also be caused by a trauma to the head through assault, a road traffic accident, and accidents at work or in the home, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). Sporting injuries are the cause of many acquired brain injuries and have been subject to much media attention in recent years, with concern growing surrounding the long-term effects of concussions sustained through sporting activities. Awareness must be raised as to the dangers of head injuries in sport in order to prevent ABIs, along with stricter guidelines on how long an individual should rest following a concussion.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), one of the most common effects of an ABI is breakdown in marriages, relationships and family units as people struggle to cope with the changes in circumstances, and often personalities, following an ABI. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) discussed the increased propensity to commit crime after an ABI. Today I spoke to Peter Taylor, the business manager of a charity based near my constituency called Second Chance Headway, which specialises in caring for people with brain injuries. He talked about the amazing work that they do. He also mentioned that quite often families fall apart as children struggle to understand why the lady who looks like mummy can no longer do the things that mummy used to be able to do—simple tasks like making tea or washing—and wonder why she is angry a lot of the time when she used to be so patient and loving. Obviously this can apply to daddy too. Those are just some of the devastating effects of ABI that often happen behind closed doors.

Peter stressed the importance of raising awareness, and especially of the fact that an ABI is a brain injury for life, that a person could face 40 to 50 years of trying to adjust and come to terms with a devastating change in their life circumstances and that they may have to learn how to live again, with some of the most basic tasks having to be relearned, including how to make a cup of tea and how to dress themselves—things that we all take so much for granted.

Peter also spoke about the lack of funding and the finger pointing between social services and health commissioners over who should foot the bill for rehabilitation services, with no clear direction over where the money should come from. Second Chance Headway survives without a penny from the Government, as do many other similar charities across the country. There has to be a more co-ordinated and systematic approach to ensure that everyone with an ABI has the same quality of care and the same life chances. This service should not be reliant on the charity sector, especially in these times of austerity in which charities are struggling to access vital funds.

I would like to end by echoing the requests of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda for a Government taskforce across all relevant Departments, including Health, Education, Justice, Work and Pensions and Defence and for adequate funding for services. In the words of Peter Taylor of Second Chance Headway, “A life has to be worth living, otherwise what is the point in saving it?”

Steve Brine: I am back, Mr Speaker. Time is very tight. If I do not answer any specific questions asked, I will write to Members: I always do.

It has been a very interesting and far-reaching debate. We have heard about some of the excellent work being undertaken to improve the care, treatment and support of those with an ABI. We have also heard about so many areas where so much more needs to be done, particularly around variation in care. I am the first to admit that there is a lot more that we need to do. I am clear from the debate that we need to keep our focus on providing rapid and appropriate triage and treatment of head injury, to ensure that patients can access the most appropriate service and level of expertise from the start—especially, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said so well, in our schools. We should be seeing joint working between health, social care and education, with multi-professional assessments of a child or young person’s needs, including all the relevant experts, to get this right earlier and to prevent the cycle of problems that often lead to exclusion, brushes with the criminal justice system and a life scarred more than it already is. Dare I say it, as someone once said, we need to understand a little more and condemn a little less. I still believe in that.

Many Members talked about the need to ensure that patients have access to the necessary specialists and services that are relevant to their rehabilitation needs and to work harder than ever to iron out inconsistencies in what is available. I mentioned in my opening remarks the regional trauma networks, which have been very successful. A number of Members spoke about those, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), as usual, spoke from the heart and gave us a very personal insight into what happens when you are unlucky on a ladder and the fall-out across family and children. I think he has recovered incredibly well.

A number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), talked about identifying and supporting individuals in whom a previous brain injury may be informing impulsive risk-taking activity leading to crime. I also take away the clear message that we must maintain our research commitment. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said that a review of neuro-rehabilitation is required. The audit that we published at the end of 2016 recommends that all providers reflect on the capacity that they have. The national clinical audit of specialist rehabilitation will address that in the next stages of the audit, which are due to complete later this year.

The hon. Lady also talked about discussions with the DWP. We have discussions all the time. Many comments were made today about the DWP, so I am grateful that
the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work was on the Treasury Bench to hear those. Through the personal support package for people on employment and support allowance, the DWP is working to improve the support that it offers to those with long-term conditions such as brain injury, including peer support and training for disability employment advisers. However, it sounds like there is a lot of work to be done, and I know that my hon. Friend is keen to see that done.

Chris Bryant: We have had to go at a bit of a gallop this evening. I wonder whether the Minister could use his best offices to ensure that we have another debate fairly soon.

Steve Brine: I may have been called “perfect” by Madam Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing)—Mr Speaker, you do not want to know—but all I can say is that there are many things at my disposal, but scheduling debates in this House is not one of them. There are many ways in which the hon. Gentleman can bring forward debates in this House, and knowing him as I do, I have a funny feeling that he will be doing it some more. Whichever Minister responds to such a debate, I welcome that, because there are a lot of issues and we need to look at them. He talked about an invisible epidemic, and he may well be right. It has been a pleasure to listen to this debate, short as it has been, and an honour to respond to it.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered acquired brain injury.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Ordered,
That Rachel Maclean be discharged from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Sir Patrick McLoughlin be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,
That Sarah Jones be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Alex Norris be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Accessibility Challenges: Invisible Disabilities

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

11 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to stand in Parliament tonight to raise the important matter of the accessibility challenges faced by those in society who have invisible disabilities.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 1 billion people across the world carry a disability in some form, which is a telling statistic. We should consider the suggestion in an American survey that nearly 74% of people have disabilities that are hidden. However, I by no means wish to use parliamentary time to shun or ignore the accessibility challenges for those who rely on wheelchairs or mobility assistance. We have made huge progress, but there is still a long way to go to ensure that—from street furniture to narrow doors, steps and bollards—Britain is open and inclusive for all, yet these infrastructural improvements must go hand in hand with challenging the preconceived attitudes that exist towards both people with visible and people with invisible disabilities.

I want briefly to explain why I am so proud to stand here tonight. It stems from the tireless work of a young woman whom I have had the privilege to know, teach and fundraise for, and someone whom I am proud to call a friend. Grace Warnock is a diligent and inspirational campaigner for disability awareness, and someone whom I had the pleasure of teaching in Prestonpans in my constituency of East Lothian. She was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, a condition which I watched my mother suffer from in her 60s. I am sure that Members across the House are aware of the disease, particularly the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. From the start of this debate, to the House adjourning this evening, one more person in the UK will be diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, and that person will join the 300,000 people in the UK with the disease. It is a disease that has no cure.

I have had the pleasure to speak to Crohn’s and Colitis UK, which is not just dedicating valuable time and effort to research this condition, but—for the purposes of this debate, I want highlight this role—is at the forefront of the campaign to end the societal stigma attached to this disease. Crohn’s and Colitis UK is clear that challenging stigmas and false assumptions often challenge people with inflammatory bowel disease. That is why its own research shows that 49% of people living with this condition have been abused or verbally questioned for using an accessible toilet.

When Grace was just in primary school, she too experienced this. She noticed early on how people looked at her differently when she came out of an accessible toilet. She was faced with their bemusement, and people saying, “Why are you using those toilets?” Worse, she often faced glares of hostility. She could sense people were looking at her angrily, thinking, “You should queue like the rest of us.” Grace could have ignored this—she could simply have pretended she did not acknowledge this antagonism—yet she went home and...
decided to do something about it. She did not want to shout at these people or to scream in their faces; she wanted to educate them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank and commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this very important debate. The “Not all illnesses are visible” slogan is being taken on board by my local council in Northern Ireland. Ards and North Down Borough Council is promoting the slogan in all the toilets in the council areas. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more firms and businesses and more public bodies should ensure that people understand that a wheelchair is not necessarily the only reason for accessing a disabled toilet and that many people with hidden illnesses have the same need to do so?

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is true that the fact that something is not visible does not mean it is not there. Indeed, it was the absence of anything visible that seemed to upset the people who saw Grace standing outside the accessible toilets.

Grace went on to develop “Grace’s sign”—a powerful visual aid to articulate her inclusive message. I will abide by parliamentary protocol and hold back from displaying the sign, but for those not aware of it I should explain that it depicts a conventional wheelchair symbol, alongside which are a man and woman standing, both with an emphasised red heart. Why the red heart? Grace is asking all of us to think about those invisible disabilities, but she is also asking people to think using their hearts—to hold back and have the empathy to recognise that people with a range of different conditions may need to use accessible facilities.

The sign projects a powerful message: think with your heart and do not rush to judgment. Think and express yourself with compassion and decency. I am very proud at how far the sign has travelled across Scotland—from the Parliament building in Holyrood, to airports, shopping malls, leisure centres, businesses, council offices and the school where I used to teach. Slowly but surely, attitudes are changing across Scotland. I believe it is now the time to spread the campaign across the whole UK.

What has Grace achieved aside from what I have already mentioned? The Edinburgh Evening News awarded her “local hero” status and she won a Young Scot award and a British Citizen award. Recently, she also won the Prime Minister’s prestigious Points of Light award. People will not hear too many voices on this side of the House praising the Prime Minister, but I take this opportunity to thank her for the unique honour she bestowed on Grace. At her high school, Grace also received an award for her work outwith the school in the community.

In Scotland, this is the year of the young people—a fitting celebration of the flair, creativeness and compassion that I know, as a teacher and a father, young people hold. I am sure all Members would agree that those traits are at the very core of Grace’s sign. I hope they will also agree that we need to take the ethos of Grace’s campaign and begin applying it to all hidden disabilities. As I prepared to discuss this matter, it was striking how many organisations and charities came forward to ask me to advocate on behalf of the causes that they represent. There is also the wonderful debate that we have just had in this Chamber.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to Grace. Will my hon. Friend join me in agreeing with all those organisations, including Headway in my constituency, which rehabilitates people with severe head injuries, that they need access to these toilets? In that way, they can take people with acquired brain injury into the community and have access to proper facilities.

Martin Whitfield: I thank my hon. Friend. I was listening to the previous debate, which mentioned the stigma of an acquired brain injury and the fact that it is hidden and not obvious—someone behaves in a way that others immediately think of as irrational or drunk. That is so wrong. People should take the time to pause and think that there may be an explanation. The tutterings, mutterings and open hostility are unacceptable in this day and age.

The reality for those with these conditions is that such challenges appear every day, and it is far from unique to just one disability. ME is a hidden condition that was not even acknowledged as a disability until recently. Today is Autistic Pride Day 2018; there is the issue of the ability to raise accessibility challenges for people with autism. The National Autistic Society notes that nearly half of all autistic people in Britain often do not go out because they worry about the public’s reaction to their condition.

My constituent Grace rose to the challenge brought about by the stigma regrettably associated with her condition. She wants to extend the challenge to Parliament, to Whitehall and to MPs across the House, because when public institutions and people in buildings of this magnitude and importance are seen to do something, they start to shape the debate in society. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Scotland has given me verbal notice that he will do all he can to get this into Dover House. I am encouraged by the interest shown by the Leader of the House and I will invite the Minister to say whether she could support this with something on behalf of the Government. I will of course be writing to you, Mr Speaker, in your enviable position on the House of Commons Commission, to seek your assistance with this matter, but I encourage all Members across the House to see whether they can take the campaign to their constituencies.

As well as asking the Government to back the campaign, I would like to ask the Minister what statistics she has formally the concept of hidden disabilities in the brief carried by the Minister with responsibility for disability?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that dyslexia is also a hidden disability that brings with it stigma? People, even as adults, will resist admitting that they are dyslexic. As a society, we have to be aware of that, as well as all the other disabilities he speaks about.
Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. The stigma of a hidden disability, and the very word disability itself, does no justice to the individuals who suffer day in, day out. They suffer because of the ignorance of society around them. What I take from knowing Grace is that here was a young woman who, rather than wanting to shout at people, wanted to educate them. She wanted to remove the stigma. She wanted to ask people to think before they react. It is for society to make an environment that is welcoming for people both with hidden disabilities and visible disabilities, and perhaps move to a stage where we stop perceiving things as a disability and look at people as individuals. If we could get to that point, we would be a grown-up society. I have to say it took a young girl, Grace Warnock, to really show that and to help me to articulate that demand.

11.11 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this really important debate. I join him in saying what a privilege it was to be in the Chamber for the preceding debate, on acquired brain injury. It is very timely that we can talk about hidden disabilities following that debate. It is a very important topic. I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the tone he has taken in wanting to work so collaboratively with Members across the Chamber. He is right to say that each and every one of us are powerful advocates for change in our constituencies across our great country. There is something we can all do.

I think we can all understand that all disabled people face barriers in their daily lives, but people with hidden disabilities have to overcome the fact that it is not always easy to understand the support they might need. That is why we need to have debates such as this one and to think each day about people around us who may well have hidden disabilities that we are not aware of. It is all too easy to recognise somebody with a mobility need if they have a device or a wheelchair. Somebody with a visual impairment may have an assistance dog or a cane, but as we have heard this evening many health conditions—dyslexia, autism, acquired brain injuries and all sorts of other conditions—are simply not visible to the human eye.

The Equality Act 2010 has a very clear definition of disability. It says that it is anyone with a long-standing illness, disability or impairment which causes substantial difficulty with day-to-day activities. I am sure that, while we can all understand that as a legal definition of disability, not everyone within these groups identify themselves as disabled.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about numbers. People have told us they have a hidden disability: 14% of disabled people have a learning disability, 24% have a mental health condition and 17% have an impairment that can impact on their memory. These statistics, like any other statistics around disability, relate to people who have come forward to say, “This is how I feel. This is how I report.” We know that the information is limited, but just because it is limited does not mean that we do not take this really seriously. We absolutely do, and we want to build a culture and create a community in our country where people feel confident to come forward to their loved ones, families and employers and say, “I have this disability. I have this impairment. This is what it means to me. Can you support me, so that I can play my full part in society and achieve my potential with that support?”

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for the spirit in which she is responding and her recognition of invisible disability. I hope that in her role in the Department for Work and Pensions, she will make sure that these factors are taken into account in assessments for employment and support allowance and personal independence payment. Conditions such as complex regional pain disorder, on which I have an Adjournment debate tomorrow evening, are not recognised for the purposes of personal independence payment, in spite of it being one of the most painful and debilitating conditions.

We have heard about the great work that Grace has done. She has a very fluctuating condition—one that is quite difficult for people to understand. I understand that the fluctuation itself can make it even more challenging for her, and I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has brought the campaign for her sign to the House’s attention today, as he did on 24 May. It is really important that we keep talking about this issue and celebrate the work that Grace has done. It is marvellous that she got the award from the Prime Minister, and I would like to put my congratulations on the record. As her former teacher, the hon. Gentleman must be very proud indeed of what she has done.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have been working with the Leader of the House. We have accepted the challenge to make sure that we can get the sign up on the parliamentary estate. I look forward to working with the Speaker to make sure that that is the case, and I accept the challenge this evening to see what I can do to make sure that across Government Departments we can take up the sign that Grace has so beautifully designed and ensure that this is extended. It is remarkable that somebody from the age of 10 picked up that the sign would have such a huge impact on improving the quality of life, not just for her, but for people throughout our country.

It was really great to hear of the progress that has been made. I understand that Iain Gray, the Member of the Scottish Parliament, has been working with the hon. Gentleman and providing a lot of support to make sure that the Scottish Parliament is using these signs, and it was great to hear this evening that now Edinburgh airport, the stadium and shops all over the country are, too.
It is important to emphasise that businesses need to think very seriously about providing accessible toilets. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have championed the Changing Places toilets and how important they are. We have a consortium that we support in the DWP. I have listened to many people who have provided Changing Places toilets, and they have told me that the foothold to businesses, stadiums and outlets has increased, so it means that the businesses are getting more business from people with disabilities.

I am passionate about making sure that all disabled people have improved access to goods and services. There are 13 million disabled people in the UK, and they and their families have a huge combined spending power estimated at about £250 billion every year. This is often called the “purple pound”. Many businesses are missing out on this potential market because their goods and services, whether online or in the real world, are inaccessible to disabled people. Of course, that includes accessible toilet facilities. To tackle this issue, I have appointed 14 disability sector champions whose job is to identify and drive improvements in their sectors. They represent a range of sectors and businesses from retail to arts and culture and sport, and they are using their influence as leaders in their industries to drive improvements in the accessibility and quality of services.

Last November, I established a retail forum with our retail sector champion, Helen Drury, to raise the importance of improving accessibility in the retail sector. Helen has recently been promoted and is moving into the financial services industry, but I am grateful for her work in helping me to set up the forum and in developing an accessibility toolkit that has been widely welcomed by landlords of shopping centres and retailers themselves and which shows them how relatively easy and straightforward it is to make minor adaptations so that their businesses are far more welcoming and inclusive. I am pleased to announce that Samantha Sen, head of policy and campaigns at Revo, will take over as a temporary replacement for Helen until we can complete our recruitment exercise towards the end of the year.

The forum brings together high-level leaders in the retail sector, both retailers themselves and landlords, to roll out good practice across the sector. At our last meeting in March, a member highlighted the success that his business had had with the “Disability can be invisible” sign—it put it on its bathroom doors and seen the positive impact it could have. The forum is working with me on a new initiative called Purple Tuesday. Thanks to the hon. Gentleman’s having raised Grace’s sign with me this evening, I will make sure that the toolkit we develop for the implementation of Purple Tuesday includes the sign.

We are working with a not-for-profit disabled people’s user-led organisation called Purple to develop a new annual retail event, which we are calling Purple Tuesday, to raise awareness of the value of the purple pound and to encourage retailers to put on events to encourage people into their stores and to make those minor adaptations so that they can not only provide an inclusive environment but realise some of that £250 billion for their own businesses. We hope that the first Purple Tuesday will be on 13 November. I will make sure that the Department does everything to support it. I will update Members nearer the time once the plans are more developed, because it is something we can all get behind; we can all encourage retailers on our high streets and in our communities to do that. I hope that by introducing Purple Tuesday we will not just support retailers to improve the accessibility of their services and the customer experience of disabled people, but improve our understanding of disability, bust some of those myths and get rid of the stigma around disabled people.

We know from similar campaigns, such as the Time to Change campaign, that it is possible to change attitudes over time, and I was pleased to see the most recent results from the Time to Change national survey, which showed that the overall attitude trend between 2008 and 2016 was moving in the right direction: just under 10% of people have changed their minds and improved their attitudes towards people with disabilities. That is 4.1 million people. It is possible, then, to make progress, and I am determined to do everything possible to make sure that disabled people in our country are as appreciated as everybody else and enabled and supported to play the fullest part they can in society.

I am grateful that we have had the opportunity to talk about the importance of making toilets accessible and of getting people to stop and think again if they see someone using such a toilet. The fact that a person’s disability cannot be seen does not mean that the person does not need to use that facility.

I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on Grace’s campaign, and to ensuring that all her signs appear on the parliamentary estate, in Government buildings, and in high streets throughout our country. Congratulations to him, and congratulations to Grace.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Workforce

1. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps has he taken to tackle NHS workforce shortages. [905912]

**The Minister for Health** (Stephen Barclay): NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England are working with trusts on a range of recruitment, retention and return-to-practice programmes to ensure that the required workforce are in place to deliver safe and effective services.

**Martyn Day**: The nursing vacancy rate in England is more than double that in Scotland, with one in 10 positions unfilled. The Royal College of Nursing has welcomed the Scottish Government’s Health And Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Bill, which will enshrine safe staffing levels in law. Will the Minister now follow the Scottish Government’s example and bring such a provision into law for NHS England?

**Stephen Barclay**: I fear that the hon. Gentleman, Gentleman wrote his question before yesterday’s announcement. I thought that he might have started by welcoming the additional £2 billion of investment that Scotland’s NHS will be receiving. We are making historic investment in our workforce which is the matter we are dealing with now, in our workforce will allow us to reduce that agency spend. That goes to the heart of the Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday. Up-front investment in our workforce will allow us to reduce that agency cost.

21. **Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the recent High Court decision on universal credit, which determined that one of my constituents with severe mental health issues was discriminated against financially for moving from one area to another, was correct? Does he agree that people with disabilities should not be penalised in such a way? Will he commit to increasing mental health budgets to ensure that such people get the support that they need in their communities post-Winterbourne?

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The question should relate to the workforce, which is the matter we are dealing with now, but never mind. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is interested in hearing about the workforce situation.

**Stephen Barclay**: The two do go together because the mental health workforce is a key component of the NHS workforce. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the extra £1 billion by 2020 that the Prime Minister announced yesterday, as well as the Government’s prioritisation of mental health, which, for too long has been seen as a Cinderella service within the NHS.
Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady will be well aware that there are 14,000 more nurses in the NHS than five years ago, but she is right to point to the wider issue of long-term workforce planning. That is why she will be aware that Audit Scotland criticised NHS Scotland for its lack of long-term workforce planning.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady’s supplementary question really reinforces the answer that I gave a moment ago: the essence of why we need a long-term plan is so that we anticipate these issues. We are addressing that through the Green Paper on social care, and that is part of the investment that the Prime Minister announced yesterday.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday the Prime Minister said that “current workloads are not sustainable”—is that any wonder after eight years of Tory cuts and austerity? The Minister knows that the number of health visitors in the workforce is falling, and that health visitors are vital to improving child health and wellbeing outcomes. No new public health money was announced yesterday; new money will come in 2020. Can the Minister guarantee that health visitor numbers will not continue to fall and that the public health budget will be ring-fenced?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful that the shadow Secretary of State has drawn attention to public health because the Government have been making significant progress in that area. We have the lowest ever number of teenagers smoking and the lowest ever teenage pregnancy rate. Binge drinking is down and we are addressing child obesity with the sugar tax, which is among a number of measures that the Government have been bringing forward. We are making progress on public health and the hon. Gentleman is right to draw that to the attention of the House.

Jonathan Ashworth: This Government are breaking the Tory manifesto promise and raising taxes, yet they cannot even answer basic questions about health visitor numbers. The NHS workforce deliver the constitutional performance targets, including the 18-week referral-to-treatment target, and targets for accident and emergency and cancer treatment. Will the Minister reassure patients and the taxpayers whose taxes are going up that he will rule out dropping those essential targets?

Stephen Barclay: Once again—as we heard yesterday—there is no welcome for the announcement of additional funding for the NHS. Opposition Front Benchers are playing politics and talking down our NHS. The Prime Minister has set out a long-term vision to improve standards and raise mental health, which Labour Back Benchers highlighted. The hon. Gentleman should come to the House and welcome that investment in our NHS.

Regional Health Inequalities

2. Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the level of funding for the NHS on regional health inequalities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): We take a comprehensive approach to reducing health inequalities, underpinned by legal duties. This includes addressing the wider causes of ill health, promoting healthier lifestyles, and tackling differences in health access and outcomes. A formula is used to allocate funding to clinical commissioning groups, and health inequalities form part of this.

Liam Byrne: Birmingham has some of the worst health outcomes in the country. It is not a surprise, as A&E waits of over four hours are up by more than 127% in recent years, and waits of more than 18 weeks for treatment are up by 65%. Yet, according to freedom of information request responses I have received, our trusts in Birmingham have to make savings of £155 million this year. What are the Government going to do to save the health system in Birmingham, which is currently in a state of collapse?

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is disappointing to hear the right hon. Gentleman making such negative points about his local NHS when 86% of GPs in his area are rated good or outstanding. Everything about yesterday’s announcement will tell Members that we are not complacent about the health challenges facing us, and we will make the necessary resources available. It ill behoves Opposition Members to keep continually talking down our NHS.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the best way in which to reduce health inequalities across the country is to continue to build a strong economy that offers good jobs and prospects to all the people of our country?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I could not have put that better myself—[Laughter.] Opposition Members can laugh, but the Government firmly believe that work is good for people’s health. We are committed to getting 1 million more people with disabilities into work so that we actually treat them as assets, and we are encouraging them to be more independent and to take control of their own lives. The only way to achieve that is by having a strong economy.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): When the coalition Government came into office in 2010, life expectancy began to stall for the first time in over a century. This, coupled with eight years of funding cuts, means that there are grossly disproportionate...
health inequalities across the country. For example, according to Northern Health Science Alliance, people in the north are 20% more likely to die early than people in the south. Is not it a failure of the Government's funding deal for the NHS that it comes with no public health money to tackle these astonishing regional health inequalities?

Jackie Doyle-Price: No, it is not. Labour Members like to draw attention to north-south divides and so on, but the issues about health inequalities are much more complex than how money is spent and where. Within my constituency, for example, there are differences of 10 years in life expectancy depending on the particular locality. We need a much more multi-layered approach to tackling inequality, and that is what this Government will have.

Tier 2 Visa Cap

3. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the effect of the tier 2 visa cap on recruitment in the NHS and social care sector. [909514]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last week the Home Secretary removed doctors and nurses from the tier 2 visa cap.

Layla Moran: In Oxfordshire, the situation with social care workers is at least as bad a problem. Of course we all very much welcome the removal of doctors and nurses from the cap, but what about social care workers? Why are we focusing on only half the problem?

Mr Hunt: Perhaps I can help the hon. Lady by pointing out that tier 2 visa cap is specifically for higher-paid workers. We do need to think about social care workers, but a lot of them are lower paid. That is why we are putting together a 10-year workforce plan for the health and social care sectors, both of which are very important. We will make sure that that goes hand in glove with the NHS plan that we announced yesterday.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The real effect of the cap is that there are not enough staff in the health service, as is shown by “NHS SOS”, a campaign run a few weeks ago in Stoke by The Sentinel that highlighted the lack of doctors and nurses. Realistically, what will the Secretary of State do to remedy that situation in Stoke-on-Trent? Will he meet people from The Sentinel so that they can present the evidence?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what we have been doing in the past five years: we have 14,300 more nurses, 10,100 more doctors, and over 40,000 more clinicians across different specialties. He will be very relieved to know that, on top of that, we are promising 50% more than his party did at the last election.

People with Learning Disabilities

4. Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the (a) quality and (b) availability of health and social care services for people with learning disabilities.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Commissioning high-quality health and social care services is a local responsibility. The Care Quality Commission monitors, inspects and regulates services that people with a learning disability may use. Where quality and safety standards are not met, it will take action.

Kate Hollern: The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services warned this week that social care services are on the verge of collapse. Despite the announcement of £20 billion yesterday, there was no mention of social care. Cuts of more than £7 billion have left hundreds of thousands of elderly and disabled people without adequate support. What specific measures are the Government taking to ensure that the elderly and disabled are receiving proper care?

Caroline Dinenage: Adult social care was mentioned yesterday, specifically in the news that we plan to bring together the way in which health and social care interoperate. We need more collaborative work between health and social care to reduce the amount of pressure that one puts upon the other. We have set out very clearly that we will produce a Green Paper later this year to address how we will tackle the challenges that we face in adult social care, and we will look at how we fund that.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Providers of day care services for people with learning disabilities are not currently subject to an inspection regime. Will the Minister consider bringing such services within the scope of the Care Quality Commission to reassure families about quality and safeguarding issues?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the fundamental importance of being reassured that all services that are provided are safe and reliable. Since the CQC has been looking at services up and down the country, it has brought to them a level of transparency and, indeed, quality. We keep under review the services that it regulates, and this is certainly something that we can discuss with it.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Will the Government end uncertainty for people with learning difficulties who need social care by funding the historical liabilities associated with the sleep-ins crisis?

Caroline Dinenage: We are aware of concerns in the sector with regard to sleep-ins and we are looking very carefully at the options. We have been developing the evidence base very carefully. We have been engaging with the European Commission, the sector and other Government Departments.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust recently won a bid under the Beyond Places of Safety scheme to put in place IT support for users of learning disability services. Is that not a very useful way of taking forward such projects?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is vital that when we look at how to move forward with both our health and social care services, we are able to capture all the latest technology to ensure that we improve the experience for all our service users.
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Much of the health and social care for people with learning disabilities in Plymouth is provided by Livewell Southwest, a social enterprise. The new pay increases for NHS staff will not be mapped over to social enterprise staff, so when they merge back into the NHS, we risk a two-tier workforce. Will the Minister consider extending the pay increases to support those who work with people with learning difficulties in the social enterprise sector so that we ensure that everyone doing the same job is paid the same amount?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It would be terrible to see a health and social care sector in which people doing the same work are valued differently, so I will look carefully at the point he raises.

Life Sciences and Medical Research

5. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support UK life sciences and medical research.

22. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support UK life sciences and medical research.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The life sciences sector is critical to the UK economy, which is why we support it with a £1 billion annual grant through the National Institute for Health Research.

Luke Graham: What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to further life sciences in Scotland? Will he meet me to see what the UK Government can do to support the forthcoming International Environment Centre in Clackmannanshire in my constituency?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. The life sciences industry is critical to Scotland, and Scotland’s role is critical to the UK. We all remember Dolly the sheep being pioneered in Edinburgh University, and last week’s announcement of a new centre in Renfrewshire is another good example of the great things happening in Scotland.

Alan Mak: The use of big data and artificial intelligence in medical research has the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives. Will my right hon. Friend consider setting up data hubs and support the full digitisation of patient records?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is very knowledgeable about that area. We have announced the creation of a set of digital innovation hubs, and perhaps we can broaden those to turn them into the hubs that he thinks would be a good idea.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Getting new drugs approved more quickly would not just be a big boost for the life sciences and medical research sector, but would help my constituents and others across the country with cystic fibrosis who desperately need access to Orkambi. They have been waiting for years; it is not good enough. Why can the Secretary of State not sort this out, get a grip, get his officials and Vertex in a room, and force them to come to an agreement? People have waited too long for this.

Mr Hunt: That is exactly what we have been doing, but we need Vertex to be reasonable regarding the price that it offers the NHS. We need to pay fair prices. We have heard that it will be coming back with a new offer next week—we hope it is a reasonable one—but we urge Vertex to waive commercial confidentiality so that we can all see, in the interests of transparency, the kind of prices it is trying to charge the NHS.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State consider West Yorkshire in particular? We have the universities, the science, the technology and the life sciences; all we need is a new teaching hospital in Huddersfield.

Mr Hunt: We have great teaching hospitals in Yorkshire and we have introduced five new medical schools. When we do the new workforce plan later this year, who knows? We may need more.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), we know that the UK is a world leader in research into rare conditions, but that does not always translate into timely access to those treatments. The Secretary of State will know that there are many CFTR—cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator—treatments in the pipeline that could benefit people who are living with cystic fibrosis. Will he meet me to see how we can ensure that those are available in a timely manner for the people who desperately need them?

Mr Hunt: Of course I am happy to meet my hon. Friend. I recognise that this is one of the things that we are not good at at the moment. We have fantastic research, with amazing new drugs developed in this country, but our uptake can be painfully slow, and that is of course something that we want to put right.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): ME affects approximately a quarter of a million people across the UK, and while there has been substantial psychological research into the condition, there has been very little biomedical research. What funding will the Secretary of State make available specifically for biomedical research into the treatment and diagnosis of ME?

Mr Hunt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She is introducing a debate on it in Westminster Hall on Thursday. I have met a number of families who have suffered very badly as a result of ME, and we would all like better research, so I hope that her campaign is successful.

Sport: Public Health

6. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the public health benefits of participation in sport.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): There is a strong body of evidence on the health benefits of participating in sport—
possibly not watching it, if last night is anything to go by. Last year, a review by Sport England brought together evidence to show the association between sport and physical and mental wellbeing.

Craig Tracey: As the Minister may be aware, I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group for golf—a sport sometimes labelled, rather unfairly, a good walk spoiled. Does he agree that there are many positive health benefits associated with participation in golf, especially for people with long-term conditions?

Steve Brine: I certainly would, as someone who used to work in the golf industry before coming to the House. I was at Wentworth last month for the PGA, and a good example of what my hon. Friend refers to is a social enterprise that I met called Golf in Society led by an inspirational chap called Anthony Blackburn. He founded a project at Lincoln Golf Centre that works with people with dementia and Parkinson’s disease to show that golf is one of the best leisure activities out there, and gives people with those long-term conditions a sense that their life is not over and that they can still play golf, and play it rather well—probably better than me.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In 2016, Stoke-on-Trent was the European city of sport, but it faces some of the highest health inequalities in the country. The Stoke newspaper The Sentinel highlighted the power of exercise in its recent NHS SOS campaign. Will the Minister meet the editor Martin Tideswell and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) to receive details of that incredibly important local campaign?

Steve Brine: I am aware of that campaign. Something that we want to see in schools across the country, including in Stoke, is the Golden Mile. I see good examples in schools in my constituency and across the country when I travel. We are interested to learn more about what Stoke has done on this subject.

Homelessness

7. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that homeless people are able to access healthcare and dentistry services. [905919]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): NHS England has a legal duty to commission services to meet local need, which includes people who are homeless, and we are very clear that a patient should not be turned away from a GP if they cannot produce any supporting documentation. If they state that they reside within the boundaries for the practice, the GP is expected to accept the registration. The same applies for dentistry, and training is in place to remind people of their obligations.

Stella Creasy: Mags Drummond is a Walthamstow woman on a mission, to try to help our many rough sleepers get decent quality healthcare, but she, like me, has hit a brick wall with our local dentists and doctors. It is little wonder that one study shows that 15% of homeless people have pulled out their own teeth because they cannot get access to services. Will the Minister meet Mags and me to look at what we can do to change that and make sure that her promises are not toothless?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Very good—I commend the hon. Lady for her wit, and I agree with her. Notwithstanding our expectations of GPs and dentists in this regard, it is quite clear that homeless people do not always have access to the treatment they should have. The hon. Lady will be aware of the work that we are doing to support rough sleepers, and I would be delighted to meet her and Mags Drummond to see what insight they can provide on how we can improve services in this area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is of the utmost importance that we are ready for the one-minute silence, so I shall take a brief inquiry from Mr Nic Dakin, and a brief reply.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There are homeless people in the Scunthorpe area who present with mental health problems. What are the Government doing to ensure that proper mental health support is there for people who present as homeless?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Mental health is both a symptom and a cause of homelessness, and we will tackle that as part of our work on rough sleepers.

Mr Speaker: Does anyone else want to come in on this? Apparently not. I do not wish to proceed to the next question because of the unpredictability of the time that it will take. Colleagues will want to prepare themselves for the one-minute silence that we are about to observe. I think I can say with some confidence that everyone who is in the House today will wish to observe that one-minute silence. Perhaps they will think it appropriate to stand. That one-minute silence is going to start very soon. The next question is grouped, so it would be highly inconvenient to take it. Any moment now we shall observe the silence. [Interruption.] There is much merit in repetition in certain circumstances.

Order. We shall now observe silence for one minute to remember those who died or were affected by the attack outside Finsbury Park mosque, I remind colleagues, a year ago today.

12 noon

The House observed a minute’s silence.

Personal Health and Care Budgets

8. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the adoption of personal health and care budgets. [905920]

18. Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the adoption of personal health and care budgets. [905930]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I know that the thoughts of the whole House are with the families affected by the terrible atrocity a year ago.
Personal health budgets have a transformative effect on people with very complex health needs, and we plan for 50,000 to 100,000 more people to benefit from them by 2021.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Does he agree that a key part of integrating health and social care is giving individuals more say and flexibility in how they use their entitlements? Will he consider extending his pilots to my constituency of North West Norfolk?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely, and not just to North West Norfolk, but to the whole country. We are currently consulting on giving a right to personal health budgets to people with the most complex health needs. That would be about 350,000 people and would include anyone with a continuing NHS need combined with a mental health need, a learning disability, autism or PTSD. Obviously, it would be hugely significant if we were able to proceed with that.

Andrew Lewer: Will the Minister ensure that the long-term NHS plan puts a major emphasis on empowering patients through the wider availability of personal budgets? May I also join my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) and make a pitch for my local area of Northampton for one of the next wave of pilots?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely, and technology will have a big role, because this year we intend all NHS patients to be able to access their health records through an app. That will be extremely empowering, but my hon. Friend is right that giving people with long-term conditions control over their health and care destiny is a potentially huge leap forward.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): While I agree with the philosophy and approach behind health and personal care budgets, will the Secretary of State acknowledge that the 21% fall in social care funding between 2010 and 2015-16 has caused a catastrophe in this area? Will he acknowledge that if this approach is to work in future, the funding has to be there?

Mr Hunt: I congratulate the last Labour Government on introducing direct payments, which were the first step in this process. The hon. Lady talks about cuts in social care, which I acknowledge, but, with respect to her, she never talks about the reason, which was that in 2008 we had the worst financial crisis in our peacetime history, and we had to take measures. It is as a result of creating 3.2 million jobs since then that funding for social care is now going up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the number of bed days lost increased in the second quarter of 2017-18, with most of the patients subject to delays being elderly people, will the Minister outline a dedicated strategy for getting people out of hospital and back home with appropriate care as a matter of urgency, for the good of the patient as well as the public purse?

Mr Hunt: This is a huge challenge in all parts of the United Kingdom. In England, about 22% of bed days are occupied by people who have been in hospital for more than three weeks, and probably less than 20% of those people should be in hospital. We are taking urgent steps to rectify that, because it is very, very bad for the patients involved.

**Mental Health Workforce**

9. Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the size of the mental health workforce.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The mental health workforce plan published last summer underpins our expansion of mental health services, as set out in the “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”. We aim to create 21,000 new posts in mental health by 2021.

Mr Jones: I thank the Minister for her response. Mental health is one of the many complex drivers of rough sleeping, and can add to the complexity of getting rough sleepers off the street and into accommodation. Will my hon. Friend say how the new mental health employees in the NHS can help us to get rough sleepers off the streets and into accommodation?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hope the expansion of mental health services will stop people becoming rough sleepers in the first place by bringing forward support earlier in the process. In January, we announced a £1 billion investment in mental health, part of which will be focused on crisis care and helping people who are experiencing crisis to stay out of hospital. The workforce plan backs that commitment by planning 5,200 posts to support those in crisis. We will be working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on a forthcoming strategy to make sure we honour our commitments.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just the size of the mental health workforce that is critical, but the pressures faced within those workforces. We have just learned that there was the highest number of out-of-area placements in January since records were first kept. Mental health doctors and nurses often spend hours hunting for out-of-area beds, taking them away from other patients. When is the Government’s pledge to reduce and eventually ban out-of-area placements actually going to start to become a reality?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. We are determined to end out-of-area placements, but clearly that will require behavioural change on the part of commissioners, as well as making sure that the investment takes place. I know she will continue to hold me to account on this issue, because it is clear that out-of-area placements can cause harm and we must tackle them.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): According to data from 48 of 56 NHS mental health trusts, 3,652 patients suffered an injury in 2016-17 through being restrained—the highest number ever. There are concerns that increased use of insufficiently trained agency and bank staff since 2013 is contributing to this increase. Employing 21,000 new staff by 2021 just is not good enough. What is the Minister doing now to ensure that wards are safely staffed and patients are not injured?
Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware that I have been working with her colleague the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on his Bill to limit the use of restraint, because we on the Government Benches also very firmly believe in that. An essential part of his measure will be to improve training for staff in mental health units. That will be a tool in making sure that restraint is minimised.

**Capital Investment Projects**

10. **Sir Roger Gale** (North Thanet) (Con): What funding his Department has recently allocated to capital investment projects in the NHS. [905922]

23. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What funding his Department has recently allocated to capital investment projects in the NHS. [905935]

The **Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** (Mr Jeremy Hunt): In the Budget we announced £3.9 billion of additional capital funding, and 77 projects have conditional approval.

Sir Roger Gale: Could my right hon. Friend indicate what implications that welcome statement might have for the much needed rebuilding and refurbishment of the A&E unit at the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital in Margate?

Mr Hunt: I hope it will have a positive impact. We are asking NHS trusts to get their proposals in during July. We are also delighted that there is a new medical school in Canterbury and we hope that this will be the start of a transformation of NHS services.

Kevin Foster: Earlier this year, Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust was allocated £13.3 million of capital funding for improved urgent care and a new emergency department at Torbay Hospital. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what progress is being made to get those major construction projects under way?

Mr Hunt: I think it will be brilliant not just for patients at Torbay Hospital but for patients living in Newton Abbot and Torquay. My understanding is that this project is on track, and my hon. Friend should be very proud, because he campaigned hard.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Warrington desperately needs a new hospital to replace its old, out-of-date buildings, so in allocating future capital funding will the Secretary of State bear in mind the levels of health deprivation that exist in the area, and will he ensure that any new hospital is accessible to those in my constituency, which has areas that are among the most health deprived in the borough?

Mr Hunt: I visited the hospital not too long ago and was able to see for myself some of the estate issues the hon. Lady talks about. I can assure her that need is a fundamental criterion when we look at allocating capital funding.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that he has presided over a crisis in capital funding, with a £5.5 billion estimated maintenance backlog, £1 billion of which is classified as urgent. Yesterday’s statement hopefully goes some way to addressing that, although it was far from clear whether capital funding was included in that announcement. Can the Secretary of State confirm today whether any cash generated by the sale of NHS property under the Naylor review is in addition to the money announced yesterday?

Mr Hunt: Yes, I can.

**Highly Specialised Technologies Evaluations**

11. **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions his Department has had with representatives of NICE on increasing the capacity of the highly specialised technologies evaluation process. [905923]

The **Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** (Steve Brine): My officials have regular discussions with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, of course, but we are clear that there is no fixed capacity in NICE’s HST programme. The number of drugs that it evaluates each year is driven by the pipeline of drugs expected to come to market, and we will refer any suitable drugs to it for evaluation.

Mary Glindon: There is a risk that new treatments for life-limiting conditions, such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy and spinal muscular atrophy, might not be approved by NICE, so will the Minister meet me and Muscular Dystrophy UK to discuss ways to facilitate access to treatments, as highlighted by the charity’s FastTrack campaign?

Steve Brine: NICE has recommended the drug Translarna for use in the treatment of Duchenne muscular dystrophy; it is now routinely available on the NHS. It is a disease that I grew up with—the friends that I grew up with did not, and I did, and this is a timely reminder of how terrible this disease can be. I would be really pleased, therefore, to meet the hon. Lady and the charity that she mentioned.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Is the Minister aware of the recent NICE draft review regarding treatment of abdominal aortic aneurysms? Some 1,300 to 2,000 lives are saved yearly by NHS AAA screening. If the draft recommendations are adopted, a patient is likely to have an aneurysm erupt before treatment and 80% of patients are then likely to die. Will the Minister look carefully at this issue to avoid this unintended consequence?

Steve Brine: I am not the all-seeing eye, so all I can say is yes, I will look very carefully at the issue that my hon. Friend raises.

**Community First Responders**

12. **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support community first responder units. [905924]

The **Minister for Health** (Stephen Barclay): Community first responders play a valuable role in helping ambulance services. Support includes ongoing training, necessary medical equipment and occupational health support.
Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): In just five years, the Neilston and Uplawmoor first responders have responded to over 1,300 calls, saving many lives, and earlier this month they received the Queen’s award for voluntary service. Will the Minister join me in congratulating all the volunteers and paying tribute to community first responder units right across the United Kingdom?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Stuart McLellan, Ross Nelson and the volunteers that play such a key role. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) also performs this service in his constituency. I have spoken to him about it and I know that it plays a very valuable role.

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, in the frame, we now have a dame—I call Dame Cheryl Gillan.

Epilepsy Guidance (Autism)

14. Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of including autism in NICE guidance on epilepsy.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): NICE is currently in the early stages of updating the clinical guidelines on the diagnosis and management of epilepsies in adults, and plan to go out to consultation on a draft scope in October this year.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The UK’s autism research charity Autistica advises that up to 40% of people with epilepsies are, in fact, autistic, and that epileptic seizures are the leading cause of early death for autistic people with a learning disability. NICE guidance has never mentioned autism when referring to epilepsy, and autistic people have distinctive types of epilepsies that require different clinical approaches. Will the Minister please ensure that NICE includes autism in the guidelines on epilepsy?

Caroline Dinenage: At this stage, it is too early in the update process for NICE to say exactly what its guidance will cover. However, my right hon. Friend is chair of the all-party group on autism and vice-chair of the all-party group on epilepsy, and she was the driving force behind the Autism Act 2009. I think that NICE would do very well to heed her advice.

Mr Speaker: And that advice will be proffered on a very large number of occasions in this Chamber until the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) gets what she seeks—I think I can say that with not just confidence, but certainty.

Clinical Staff Shortages

15. Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support NHS foundation trusts to tackle shortages in clinical staff.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): The workforce strategy we are bringing forward will include investment and an expansion in the number of medical schools—five new medical schools—alongside those 1,500 new doctor places.

Heidi Allen: I had wanted to ask the Secretary of State to get behind exempting nurses and doctors from the tier 2 visa process, but I do not need to do that. I just have to thank him for his support in doing that. Instead, for his next challenge, will he commit to looking again at the pensions cap, which I fear might be one reason some senior NHS professionals and doctors are retiring sooner than they might otherwise do?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s support on tier 2 visas. She will be aware that clinicians who reach the £1 million lifetime allowance limit can expect a pension of about £44,000, payable at age 60, increasing with inflation, plus a tax-free lump sum of about £132,000. Although these are ultimately issues for the Treasury, it is important that we ensure that tax allowances, two thirds of which go to higher-rate taxpayers, are fair to other taxpayers.

Innovative Drugs and Devices

16. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of innovative drugs and devices in the NHS.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The Government are committed to ensuring that innovative healthcare products reach patients faster than ever before. We have established the Accelerated Access Collaborative to identify transformative innovations and help their route to market, and today we have appointed Lord Darzi as the new chair of the AAC to lead this work.

Nigel Mills: I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister in her speech yesterday announced much more funding for personalised medicines and new technologies that will transform care. On that basis, will the Minister update the House on when the groundbreaking CAR-T—chimeric antigen receptor T-cell—therapy might be made available to NHS patients suffering from cancer?

Steve Brine: Yes, indeed. As the cancer Minister, I consider CAR-T to be one of the most innovative and exciting treatments ever offered on the NHS. NICE is considering the first of the therapies this year and preparations are well under way. We are working closely with NHS England to make these transformative medicines available to cancer patients.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Patients with PKU—phenylketonuria—are awaiting progress on the approval of a drug called Kuvan. In the meantime, their illness is controlled by diet. Will the Secretary of State and other Members join me in Committee Room 21 after this meeting to hear about the “Diet for a day” challenge, which many Members across the House are taking up next Thursday?

Steve Brine: Having just dialled into the Secretary of State’s diary, I know that he is going right after these questions.

Mr Speaker: That is very impressive, up-to-the-minute information from the hon. Gentleman.
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the Minister have proposals for the reform of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency? I hope so.

Steve Brine: We keep all our arm’s length bodies, including the MHRA, under review to provide best value for taxpayers, and we are working closely with Lord O’Shaughnessy, who is the Minister responsible for this area.

Mr Speaker: We have been so brief that we must now include Mr Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Probably the most important recommendation in the new O’Neill review into antimicrobial resistance was the requirement for diagnostics prior to the prescription of antibiotics by 2020. Will the Minister update the House on progress towards that goal, and will he agree to meet me and colleagues, including Lord O’Neill, to discuss the establishment of an antibiotic diagnostics fund?

Steve Brine: Yes, the Government’s response to Lord O’Neill’s review in 2016 set out new ambitions building on existing progress, including ensuring that tests on epidemiological data are used to support clinical decision making and delivering high-quality diagnostics in the NHS in support of our other ambitions. My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and I am happy to meet him.

Childhood Obesity

17. Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce rates of childhood obesity. [905929]

19. Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce rates of childhood obesity. [905931]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): We are delivering the most ambitious childhood obesity plan in the world, and we are already seeing results. We always said that our 2016 plan was the start of the conversation, not the final word. [Interruption.] Yes, it does say that here, but I have also said it everywhere else many, many times.

Justin Tomlinson: With one in three primary school children leaving either obese or overweight and more than 77% of children not doing the minimum requirement for physical activity, surely the Government’s priority should be getting children active by opening up school facilities after hours and in the holidays, not faffing around with political gestures on television advertising that children have long since stopped watching.

Steve Brine: I do not think that it is a binary choice. We recognise that child obesity is caused by many different factors, and that no one policy will work on its own. Yes, this is about tackling advertising, and yes, it is about tackling children’s activity and working with schools; and, as I said recently, we will present new proposals very shortly.

Johnny Mercer: As the Minister will know, perhaps the two biggest challenges that we currently face in relation to young people’s health are mental health and child obesity. Will he update the House on the progress of chapter 1 of his childhood obesity plan in reducing the amount of sugar in both food and drink?

Steve Brine: Since we published the plan, progress has been made on sugar reduction. The amount of sugar in soft drinks has been reduced by 11% in response to the industry levy, and Public Health England has published a detailed assessment of progress against delivery of the 5% reduction for the first year. Progress is good, but it is not good enough, which is why we have said that we will produce chapter 2 shortly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister says that progress is not good enough, so why does he not introduce a levy on high-sugar food as well as the one on sugary drinks? Manufacturers would then reformulate the food that they produce.

Steve Brine: Because we believe that there should be a mixture of carrot and stick. We believe that the soft drinks industry levy has been successful, but we are also working with the industry on reformulation across the board. I recently visited Suntory, which makes Lucozade and Ribena. If we work with industry, we see transformative results for companies and for the people who buy their products.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): A few years ago, I initiated a debate on this issue in Westminster Hall. Since then, no progress has been made on childhood obesity. Would the Minister care to outline what he thinks will happen in the lifetime of this Parliament in terms of achieving the objectives that he has set out?

Steve Brine: We assess the plan all the time, and we make progress reports on it, as we did last month with the sugar report. However, when I addressed the Health Committee recently, I could not have made it clearer that we think there has been progress.

This is a world-leading plan. When we talk to other people around the world, they are very keen to hear about what we are doing and very interested, and we are interested in learning from them. If we do not take action, one of our biggest public health challenges will get worse and worse, and that will have implications for the health service and for all our constituents.

Topical Questions

T1. [905937] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): When something goes tragically wrong in healthcare, the best apology to grieving families is to guarantee that no one will experience the same heartache again. Last week I accepted the recommendations of the Williams review of gross negligence manslaughter, and we announced a new national clinical improvement programme to provide NHS consultants with confidential data on their clinical outcomes. From next April independent medical examiners will examine every hospital death, and the learning from deaths programme will be extended to primary care.
Rosie Cooper: Will the Secretary of State encourage NHS England to respond to my freedom of information request of 13 March this year regarding Greater Manchester Shared Services and the likely failure of the NHS to correctly enforce guidance on recruiting agency staff in the reappointment of Deborah Hancox after her criminal conviction and two-year prison sentence for defrauding the NHS? How can we employ these people?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady has highlighted what is potentially an extremely serious issue. Obviously the FOI is a matter for NHS England, but let me reassure her that the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay)—the hospitals Minister—met the chief executive of the NHS Counter Fraud Authority this morning.

T6. [905943] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): A recent report by the King’s Fund highlighted the potential for a hypothecated source of funding for health and care, with national insurance as a possible starting point. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the report that hypothecation would increase transparency in regard to what our constituents pay for health and care, and will he encourage the Chancellor to look at the report’s implications?

Mr Hunt: I thought that the report made powerful reading, and I know that my hon. Friend was associated with it. Yesterday the Prime Minister was straightforward about the fact that, if we are to preserve our NHS and make it one of the best systems in the world, the burden of taxation will need to increase, and she was willing to listen to the views of colleagues about the most appropriate way in which that should be done.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services has reported a £7 billion reduction in adult social care funding since 2010, and Age UK has reported there are now “care deserts” in some parts of the country. There are 1.2 million older people living with unmet care needs, and one in five care services has the poorest quality ratings from the Care Quality Commission.

As well as a long-term funding solution for social care, we need the extra £1 billion this year and £8 billion in the current Parliament that Labour pledged before last year’s general election. However, all that the Government offer is a delayed Green Paper. When will the Secretary of State deal with the current crisis in social care?

Mr Hunt: No, that is not correct. Yesterday we made very clear our support for the social care system and our recognition that reform of the NHS must go hand in glove with the social care system, and we said there would be a new financial settlement for the social care system. It is also time that the Labour party took some responsibility for the financial crisis that made all these cuts necessary.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Survival rates are high, but I am ambitious for more. That is why the Prime Minister recently announced £75 million to support new research into the early diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer. We will recruit 40,000 patients into more than 60 studies over the next five years, and further to this even more exciting is the rapid pathway that I was discussing yesterday with Cally Palmer, our national cancer director, which we are trialling across three hospital sites in west London as part of its local cancer alliance.

T2. [905938] Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Given the challenges the Secretary of State and his Government face in recruiting and retaining health and social care staff, will he follow the example of the Scottish Government, who pay their social care assistants and care assistants the real living wage, meaning they earn £1,100 a year more than their counterparts in England?

Mr Hunt: May I gently remind the hon. Lady that it was this Conservative Government who introduced the national living wage, and we did that on the basis of transforming the economy, championing policies that were by and large opposed every step of the way by the Scottish National party?

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister of State visited my hospital trust last month. Is he in a position to support its requests, and will he say whether he is satisfied with the progress it is making to remove itself from special measures?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): I very much enjoyed visiting the trust with my hon. Friend. As he will be aware from our discussion during that visit a process for capital bids is under way. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out, the date for that is mid-July and I look forward to seeing the bid from my hon. Friend’s trust.

T3. [905940] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): NICE guidelines on IVF seem to be largely honoured in the breach, leading to a postcode lottery across the country. Is it acceptable that women in North Lincolnshire who cannot conceive are being refused IVF if their partner has had children in another relationship?

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My hon. Friend has visited Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow and has acknowledged that it is not fit for purpose. Will he use the excellent £20 billion of extra NHS funding to ensure we get the Harlow hospital health campus we need?
Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right to champion this, as he did through the recent Adjournment debate, when he set out the case in more detail. We recognise, as we did at the last Health questions and in the Adjournment debate, that there are significant issues with the local hospital, and that is why it is working very actively on its bid for capital funding.

T4. [905941] Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Four months ago, a damning report exposed the extent of abuse inflicted on children for decades sent overseas by this Department. It said that compensation must be paid, and urgently, because people have died and others are dying. It took a month for the Prime Minister to work out which Department was responsible, and another month for the Health Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), to tell me she was formulating a response. Has she got a response today, or is she honestly going to stand at that Dispatch Box and tell me and all those survivors that the Prime Minister has spent £64 million of public money on a report that the Minister is now trying to bury?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I reject that accusation; we are far from burying it. The Prime Minister is responding to the interim report. I will repeat what I said to the hon. Lady last asked this question. We are quite clear that the child migrant policy was wrong. We have apologised for that policy, and we have established a £7 million family restoration fund. The response from the Government to that report will be laid in due course.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Can the Minister provide an update on the work being undertaken by the policy research unit on obesity to consider the relationship between the many streams of marketing and obesity, and can he tell us whether the unit is looking specifically at childhood obesity?

Steve Brine: The National Institute for Health Research—the policy research unit—is specifically looking at the impact of the marketing of products with a high sugar, fat or salt content on children’s food and drink preferences and consumption. The unit has already published a report on children’s exposure to television advertising, and it will be publishing further findings from other projects later this year.

T5. [905942] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that there is no such thing as a Brexit dividend, so the Secretary of State will need to put up taxes to fund our NHS. Will he be transparent and promise NHS workers in Portsmouth, to whom he has only just given a pay rise, that the burden will not fall on hard-working families like them—or is he robbing Peter to pay Boris?

Mr Hunt: Will the hon. Gentleman be transparent, if he disagrees with the Brexit dividend, and challenge his own party leader, who supports it?

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): I am delighted that our NHS will be getting an extra £20 billion. This has long been at the top of my agenda, and the agenda of my constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, to ensure that that money is always spent on the NHS, we need to consider a hypothecated tax as part of the funding plan?

Mr Hunt: As I say, there are compelling arguments in favour of hypothecated taxes, but there are also strong reasons why we have to be cautious—namely, the fact that tax revenues go up and down, year on year, while the NHS needs stable funding. Important arguments and discussions need to happen between now and the Budget, when the Chancellor will make that decision.

T8. [905945] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In the light of the additional funding announced by the Secretary of State yesterday, will he tell me how much additional funding will be provided for palliative care, which I highlighted in my Terminal Illness (Provision of Palliative Care and Support for Carers) Bill?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his private Member’s Bill. Palliative care is something that we do well in the UK—thanks, a lot, to the brilliant hospice movement—but we can do a lot better. I know that this will be an important part of the NHS plan.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Stroke is the fourth largest single cause of death in Britain. What action are the Government taking to prevent stroke and to raise awareness? And will the Minister meet me to discuss my GP surgery at Sutherland Lodge?

Steve Brine: Two for the price of one. Up to 70% of strokes are preventable if hypertension, atrial fibrillation, diabetes, cholesterol and other lifestyle factors are detected and managed earlier. The current national stroke strategy came to an end last year, so we are working closely with NHS England and the Stroke Association on a new national plan, which I hope to publish this summer.

T9. [905946] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): One of the biggest causes of regional health inequalities is the broken social care system, yet yesterday’s announcement postponed social care reforms again until the autumn. There is no end in sight for the overstretched and underfunded social care system, and without reforms to care, the extra money for the NHS will be wasted. Will the Minister bring up the timetable for those reforms before the care system collapses?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The fundamental issue here is that we need a social care system that works hand in hand with our health services—the two are umbilically linked. The key plank of the new NHS 10-year plan must be the full integration of health and care services. It does not make sense to publish the Green Paper before the NHS plan has even been drafted. We will bring forward a Green Paper, but in the meantime, spending on adult social care has gone up by 8% this year.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Like many others, I welcome the announcement yesterday of the £20 billion investment in the NHS. Will my right hon. Friend join me in seeking assurances that the £2 billion extra for the Scottish Government shall be allocated to spending on the NHS in Scotland?
Mr Hunt: I sincerely hope so, because Scottish NHS patients are currently 30% more likely to wait too long for their elective care.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What comparison has the Minister made of the cost of preventing children and young people’s mental health issues by tackling adverse childhood experience in the first few years of life, rather than letting them develop into much costlier issues for school-age children?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady will be aware that there is much work going on in this area. We are clear that we need to tackle these issues in schools, which is in the Green Paper, but more support also needs to be given in the early years. We are looking at how we can do that.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Northern Devon Healthcare Trust recently announced that it is to share the chairman and chief executive of the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust. Will the Minister meet me to ensure that the new arrangements will help to secure services in North Devon?

Stephen Barclay: I am happy to agree to meet my hon. Friend.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Last November, the Health Secretary committed to ending out-of-area mental health placements by 2020, but the number of people placed more than 100 km from their home rose by 65% over the past year. The earlier response from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), was no answer, so what are the Government actually going to do to turn the situation around?

Mr Hunt: There are record numbers of tier 4 beds, and we are putting record amounts of money into mental health.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will recall recently granting me a Westminster Hall debate on the HPV vaccine for boys. Will the Department update me on progress?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm that we will do that forthwith.

Mr Speaker: Forthwith. Splendid. The hon. Gentleman looks satisfied—at least for now.

We have an urgent question in a moment from Alison Thewliss. I advise the House that it is on an extremely important matter that warrants urgent treatment on the Floor of the House, but it does not warrant treatment at length. I do not intend to run it for any longer than 20 minutes, because there is other business to protect.
Glasgow School of Art

12.36 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland to respond to the fire at the Glasgow School of Art.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As the House will be aware, a fire broke out at Glasgow School of Art’s renowned Mackintosh building on the night of 15 June. The building is one of Glasgow’s iconic landmarks and is regarded as Mackintosh’s greatest work. It is rightly of global architectural significance and a unique and irreplaceable building in the eyes of many people worldwide. The art school itself is a work of art—a jewel in a city that sparkles with architectural splendour. It is worth noting that the building next door, the O2 ABC music venue, has also been affected, and it is even older and has a colourful and varied history. The art school was never a museum piece, but a living, breathing, working art school—a powerhouse of creativity and a much-loved part of the fabric of Glasgow. We can be grateful, however, that the tragedy was not worsened by loss of life, and my heartfelt thanks go out to the emergency services, particularly the fire service, who attended the scene under such adverse conditions and in the heart of the vibrant city’s nightlife.

Many people, such as myself, are still in disbelief that this could happen again after the devastating fire of 2014, particularly given the painstaking and careful efforts that have taken place to restore the building over the past years. I visited the building on 1 June as the guest at the opening of the 2018 degree show and saw the restored library and the famous “hen run”. I was struck by the love and passion of those involved in restoring the building. I am personally devastated by the fire, a fact which I communicated directly when speaking to the school’s director, Professor Tom Inns, over the weekend. My heart goes out to the school, its students and supporters, who did so much to raise funds for the restoration after 2014.

At this point, we do not know the cause of the fire, but I note that the fire service has assured us that a comprehensive and professional probe will be carried out in due course. The UK Government previously gave £10 million to rebuild the school after the last fire, and we stand ready to help again. There was never a question about the need to rebuild and restore the building when tragedy struck four years ago. The situation is far worse after the weekend’s fire, but I hope we can start with that aim in mind.

Obviously, there are real questions about what will happen next. We stand ready to work with the school, the city council and the Scottish Government. I am visiting the site and meeting the head of the school on Friday, and I will update Members when I am in a position to do so.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Secretary of State for his comprehensive response and for the support he has given.

The loss of the Glasgow School of Art, particularly in the 150th anniversary year of Mackintosh’s birth, is a very sore loss indeed for the city. As the Secretary of State mentioned, the building is internationally significant and is held very preciously in our hearts in Glasgow. All who have visited and studied there, and even those who have not been inside, feel that the building belongs to the city of Glasgow and to each individual.

It is a catastrophe to lose the building, and my heart goes out to the staff at the GSA, to Professor Tom Inns and his staff, to those who worked on the restoration and particularly to the craftspeople who put so much love, care and attention into bringing back skills that have gone out of fashion to bring the school back to its former glory.

The Secretary of State is right to mention the vibrant O2 ABC venue, which was very much part of the cultural scene in the city of Glasgow. That will also be a very sore loss to Glasgow.

Like the Secretary of State, I pay tribute to the Scottish fire and rescue service, which pumped water uphill from the Clyde to try to douse the huge flames of the inferno on Friday night; the police, who kept everybody safe; and the Salvation Army, which was on hand to provide rolls, sausages and Irn-Bru to the Weegie fire crews. They did a tremendous job in reacting to the fire, too.

Does the Secretary of State agree that speculation at this time about the future of the building and the cause of the fire is unhelpful and that we should allow the experts in the fire and rescue service to do their investigations and to carry out their very detailed work, which may take some time to reach a conclusion? It is important that we get the answers and that we learn the lessons of this fire.

Will the Secretary of State support looking at all options to ensure that traders and residents of the Sauchiehall Street and Garnethill area are supported through this and are given the financial support they need? Will he look at the further detail of whether sprinklers can be made mandatory in historic buildings?

Finally, I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State is offering support for the renovations, and I look forward to hearing more on that in the coming weeks. Can he confirm that he will give more support for donations coming from other sources and that he will use the Government’s efforts to bring in more money?

David Mundell: The House can hear the hon. Lady’s passion for the Glasgow School of Art, which is reflected across the city of Glasgow, across Scotland and across the world. She is right that speculation is unhelpful at this time, which is why I do not support calls at this stage for a public inquiry. The investigations that would normally follow a fire and the detailed investigations that are under way should be allowed to follow their course. Of course, some of those investigations will be into the structure of the building and will determine what can happen next.

As I have said, I want to work with the school, the city council and the Scottish Government once views are formulated on how a restoration can be taken forward. We stand ready to help, as we did in 2014. I will discuss the traders, businesses and residents around the Glasgow School of Art with the Scottish Government and the council.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My daughter-in-law is a postgraduate of the Glasgow School of Art, which is a much loved institution. Will the Secretary of State...
undertake to come back to the Dispatch Box when things are much clearer, so that we can get a clear understanding of what the UK Government’s undertaking will be?

David Mundell: Yes, I am happy to do that. As the original questioner indicated, it is clear that it may take some time for there to be clarity about what will happen next, and I am certainly willing to come back to the Dispatch Box.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing this urgent question. I fully support her efforts, and I am sure all Glasgow Members will stand in total solidarity to ensure we get the best outcome possible for our city.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art, that magnificent edifice that dominates the skyline of Garnethill, is the epitome of what it means to be a Glaswegian. It embodies the very essence of the city’s character and soul, and is a true example of human genius. The grief I experienced after the first fire in 2014 was profound; it felt like part of our city had died that day. Now to witness an even more severe conflagration consume this precious art nouveau masterpiece has left me both angry and incredulous that it could have happened again. What on earth has gone wrong here?

More generally, this fire represents a wake-up call for Glasgow and the entire country. We need to have a much more robust approach to protecting our amazing Victorian architectural legacy in Britain in the future or we will continue to see these tragic losses mount up as buildings of these ages continue to suffer degradation. Government at all levels—city, Scottish and British—needs to step up to meet this challenge with radical and imaginative measures.

The good thing about the Glasgow School of Art is that the past four years have seen a meticulous process of understanding the building take place. The work of the architects and craftsmen has been extraordinary. We therefore have a critical mass of knowledge and understanding of this iconic building and its construction that makes it easier than ever before to restore Mackintosh’s original vision. They are geared up and more than ready to take on that challenge, and I will be making the strongest possible case that they should be allowed that chance.

The issue of sprinklers has been debated extensively in recent times. The hon. Gentleman will be

[Stephen Kerr]

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman raises important points, and I know that he has a strong personal connection with the School of Art. Like those people who have been part of it, he feels this tragedy, but, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said, people who have never crossed the threshold of the School of Art feel it, too. I feel particularly for those craftsmen who restored the “hen run” and the library, bringing back these crafts, and how they must be feeling this week, when their work has been decimated. I take on board the points he makes about safety issues in buildings. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), who is responsible for heritage in the UK and is in his place, will also have heard what he said and we will respond specifically to that.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): As a representative of many of the students and staff of the school, and as a former frequent visitor to the ABC, this fire was a real blow to me. When the Secretary of State meets representatives of the school on Friday will he talk about ways in which the community and alumni can most appropriately help with any fundraising efforts for future restorations?

David Mundell: I most certainly will do that. The effort to raise funds after the 2014 fire was tremendous. One way in which the Government can help is through Government funding, which can be a catalyst for other funding coming in. That was very much the case in 2014, and it is very much in my mind at this time.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): This was a cruel and gut-wrenching blow to the people of Glasgow, coming just as the refurbishment from last time was nearing completion. Last night in this House we demonstrated our ability to disagree with each other and have a vigorous debate, but I am pleased that this morning we are seeing all shades of political opinion in Scotland come together in solidarity with the people of Glasgow as they deal with this great tragedy. I want to ask a couple of specific questions. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that it was a matter for the owners of buildings to determine whether or not to install sprinklers. What action does the Secretary of State for Scotland think the Government should take to ensure that sprinklers are installed in such public buildings? He mentioned the need for a thorough investigation. Does he agree that erroneous press speculation on the cause of the fire before that investigation is complete is unhelpful and undesirable?

David Mundell: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s last point; press speculation on the cause of the fire is very unhelpful. We need to let those people who are carrying out the professional investigation get on with it. I also agree that it is important that all levels of government—the city council, the Scottish Government and the UK Government—work together, and whatever our other differences, I absolutely commit to do that. The issue of sprinklers has been debated extensively in the House in recent times. The hon. Gentleman will be

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing this urgent question. I fully support her efforts, and I am sure all Glasgow Members will stand in total solidarity to ensure we get the best outcome possible for our city.

The good thing about the Glasgow School of Art is that the past four years have seen a meticulous process of understanding the building take place. The work of the architects and craftsmen has been extraordinary. We therefore have a critical mass of knowledge and understanding of this iconic building and its construction that makes it easier than ever before to restore Mackintosh’s original vision. They are geared up and more than ready to take on that challenge, and I will be making the strongest possible case that they should be allowed that chance.

In the face of reckless calls to tear the building down, what plans do the Government have to support the safeguarding and renewal of such an iconic and important cultural asset for the world? What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government on the need to safeguard the building and ensure it is appropriately restored? Given that Glasgow needs a more preventive, comprehensive strategy for preserving its ageing stock of Victorian architecture, much of which is vulnerable to fire, what plans do the Government have to support a review of the way that heritage buildings are managed and safeguarded, with fire prevention policy as a priority? What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government on the need to set up an investigation into the safety measures taken by the contractors for the restoration works? All I would say in conclusion is that the people of Glasgow deserve roses as well as bread, and the Mack will rise again.

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman raises important points, and I know that he has a strong personal connection with the School of Art. Like those people who have been part of it, he feels this tragedy, but, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said, people who have never crossed the threshold of the School of Art feel it, too. I feel particularly for those craftsmen who restored the “hen run” and the library, bringing back these crafts, and how they must be feeling this week, when their work has been decimated. I take on board the points he makes about safety issues in buildings. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), who is responsible for heritage in the UK and is in his place, will also have heard what he said and we will respond specifically to that.
aware that a sprinkler system was in the process of being installed in the building, but sadly that process had not been completed.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Glasgow School of Art has a base in Moray; I spoke to people at the Altyre campus this morning, and they asked me to express their sympathies and thoughts for everyone involved in Glasgow. What can our constituents throughout Scotland do to support the efforts to restore Glasgow School of Art?

David Mundell: When I visited the School of Art on 1 June, I met some of my hon. Friend’s constituents from Moray who had raised very considerable sums of money for the first restoration. Although those fundraisers will be as devastated as the rest of us, I am sure that, given the vigour and passion that I witnessed, they will stand ready in Moray and throughout Scotland to start the process again.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As we know, highland chieftains are very good at getting rich clan members and estates to help to pay for repairs to the roofs of their castles and mansion houses. There are some extremely well endowed art-supporting funds out there, in the US and the rest of the world; what efforts will be made to see whether they would help to pay for the restoration?

David Mundell: I am sure that every effort will be made, because the School of Art has a world-class fundraising operation. It has alumni around the world and, indeed, campuses around the world—for example, I had the pleasure to visit the campus in Singapore. We stand ready to help and support the School of Art in any of those efforts, but one thing that the experience over the past four years has demonstrated is its skill and ability in respect of fundraising.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What caused the fire four years ago? Does the Secretary of State share my general concern that, given modern safety standards, far too many fires are breaking out in large buildings in this country—for example, the London hotel fire last week—that are either undergoing or have recently undergone renovation?

David Mundell: The issue of renovations has been the subject of some comment in recent days, and it merits some attention.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Prior to my being elected to this House, I had the great honour not only of being the bailie for Garnethill, in which the GSA is found, but of having done most of my postgraduate study in the bowels of the Mack building. In resurrecting the GSA, with its critical role as a place of artistic education, what work will the Secretary of State do in conjunction with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Glasgow Kelvin and the Lord Provost of Glasgow, who also now represents Garnethill?

David Mundell: One thing that was clear when I visited the School of Art on 1 June was the wish to get students back into that building to see it as a functioning building for students, and there were detailed plans about which students and courses would be taught there. I am absolutely sure that if a restoration can go ahead, the School of Art will very much want the building to return to being a living, breathing art-school building. I will certainly do everything that I can to support that.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments and the cross-party nature in which this tragedy is being approached. Does he agree that the craftspeople, artists and performers who often perform at the O2 ABC need to be supported with specific funding, along with local shop owners? In the short term, before the big fundraising efforts take place, what can he do to ensure that they are specifically supported?

David Mundell: I am happy to look into the detail of that specific point, because it is relevant. I understand that several events that were due to take place have been rearranged and will go ahead at other venues in Glasgow. I am happy to take forward any specifics that flow from the hon. Lady’s question.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The sense of devastation is felt so keenly in Glasgow because Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s work has touched our lives in many different ways—for example, I have been to the weddings of my sister and some of my best friends at the House for an Art Lover. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society is based in another of his masterpieces, the Queen’s Cross church, which is just around the corner from my constituency office. Will the Secretary of State make sure that the society is included in any communications or information flows that the Government initiate?

David Mundell: Yes, I am happy to do that. As a previous contributor said, it is a great irony that Mackintosh’s 150th anniversary was only on 7 June, when we saw, through the worldwide celebrations, how relevant he remains around the globe.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Mackintosh once lived in a house just three doors down from where I currently live, but the Secretary of State will know that that is not the only place we can learn about Mackintosh: an exhibition is on right now at Kelvingrove Art Gallery, and it is open until the middle of August so that people can learn about his work. Will the Secretary of State encourage everybody to go and see it?

David Mundell: I most thoroughly encourage everyone to go along to that Mackintosh exhibition in Kelvingrove and, indeed, to visit any of Mackintosh’s other properties, if they have not done so, or attend the Willow Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I agree with and associate myself with the remarks that everyone has made about the heartbreaking scenes on Friday night. Does the Secretary of State agree that the creative arts and creative industries can find young people work in a way that conventional industry cannot? Will he take that into account when he considers what Government funding will be available?
David Mundell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We do not always agree, but I do believe that the creative industries are a much undervalued part of our economy. They have played a huge part in Glasgow’s regeneration and are an enormous part of Edinburgh’s success as a global festival city, and they merit more attention.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Last year, some Members from Glasgow were given a tour of the painstaking restoration of the Mackintosh building by the School of Art’s director, Professor Tom Inns, who told us how the team who had been involved in the restoration of Windsor castle had offered their advice. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the international teams that are appearing to offer their advice, both practical and financial? Like the people of Glasgow, we are not kept down for long, and nor will be the Mack.

David Mundell: The hon. Lady ends her question with a very good sentiment, and I echo it fully. The School of Art has been able to draw on worldwide expertise and to develop and see through skills that were not previously exercised, and it stands in a good position to know what would be needed in a future restoration, although the scale of this restoration would obviously be much greater than the previous one.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I am someone who delivered to Glasgow for 25 years as a postal worker, and the Mackintosh building was one of my favourite buildings to deliver to. Will the Secretary of State not only deliver on the promise that he has just given to re-fund the building, but bear in mind the students and workers in the building?

David Mundell: One of the issues that I will discuss with Professor Inns and others is students, workers and the current capacity, because although the Mackintosh building was in effect destroyed, the School of Art’s principal building was also badly damaged in terms of its operability. We want to discuss those issues and how they can be most helped in that regard.

Cannabis-based Medicines

12.58 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the medical use of cannabis.

Over the weekend, I issued an emergency licence to allow Billy Caldwell’s medical team to access cannabis-based medicine to treat life-threatening seizures caused by a severe form of epilepsy. This was an emergency procedure, which was led by a senior clinician with the support of the medical director at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital.

I am pleased to say that Billy has now been discharged from hospital. It is now for his senior clinicians to develop a long-term care plan. I am sure that the whole House would like to join me in expressing our sympathy for what Billy and his family have been going through and the very difficult time that they have faced.

The course of action in this case was unprecedented. There is strong scientific evidence that cannabis can harm people’s mental and physical health and damage communities. There are currently no legally recognised medicinal or therapeutic benefits. To date, under successive Governments, Home Office policy has been to permit the production, supply and possession of raw cannabis solely for the purposes of research with a Home Office licence. The cannabis-based medicine Sativex can, however, be prescribed in the UK because there is a proven case for its safety and efficacy. However, cases such as Billy’s, Alfie Dingley’s and others like them, have shown that we now need to look more closely at the use of cannabis-based medicines in the healthcare sector in the UK.

It has become clear to me since becoming Home Secretary that the position we find ourselves in is not satisfactory. It is not satisfactory for the parents, it is not satisfactory for the doctors, and it is not satisfactory for me. I have now come to the conclusion that it is time to review the scheduling of cannabis. Before I go into the detail of the review, let me be absolutely clear that this step is in no way the first step in the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use. This Government have absolutely no plans to legalise cannabis, and the penalties for unauthorised supply and possession will remain unchanged. We will not set a dangerous precedent or weaken our ability to keep dangerous drugs off the streets.

The approach that we will be asking the review to consider will be no different than that used previously for controlled drugs where there is evidence of medicinal benefits. The Government review will take place in two parts. Part 1 of the commission will consider the evidence available for the medicinal and therapeutic benefits of cannabis-based medicines. Professor Sally Davies, who also serves as the Chief Medical Officer, will take that part forward. It will then inform exactly which forms of cannabis or cannabis-based medicines should be taken forward to part 2.

Part 2 will be led by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The ACMD will not reassess the evidence issued by Professor Sally Davies, but will provide an assessment, based on the balance of harms and public health needs, of what, if anything should be rescheduled. If the review identifies that there are significant medical benefits, we will reschedule. We have seen in
recent months that there is a pressing need to allow those who might benefit from cannabis-based products to access them. It will, of course, take time for Sally Davies and the ACMD to complete their work and for the Government to consider their recommendations.

In the short term, my hon. Friend the policing Minister announced yesterday that the Government would be establishing an expert panel of clinicians to advise Ministers on any applications to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. This is intended to ensure that advice to Ministers on licensing in these cases is clinically led, based firmly on medical evidence and as swiftly as possible. The chief medical officers across the UK have already been actively working together on the panel, and the expert panel will start considering applications within a week.

Earlier today, my hon. Friend the policing Minister also spoke to Alfie Dingley’s mum, Hannah Deacon, and informed her that we would issue a licence for Alfie later today. All of the work I have outlined today is about making sure that we keep in step with the latest scientific evidence, and that patients and their families have access to the most appropriate course of medical treatment. I pay tribute to the Policing Minister for all his excellent and sustained work on this important issue.

As a father, I know there is nothing worse than seeing your child suffer. You would do anything to take away their pain. That is why I have the utmost sympathy for Billy Caldwell, Alfie Dingley and many others like them, and for their parents who have been under unimaginable stress and strain. I know that they are following a gut parental instinct to do whatever is in their power to alleviate the suffering of their child. Today I would like to say to this House that I will do everything in my power to make sure that we have a system that works so that these children and these parents get access to the best medical treatment. I commend this statement to the House.

1.4 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement. I am well aware of the damage that cannabis consumption can cause, whether it is the health of very young consumers or ganja psychosis. The newer forms of cannabis, notably skunk, are very much stronger than the cannabis available a generation ago. However, I am also aware, as the Home Secretary will be, that a former chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, Professor Nutt, has said that cannabis is less harmful than alcohol. I note that Baron Hague of Richmond is calling for complete decriminalisation.

The Opposition welcome the Home Secretary’s statement that he will look more closely at the use of cannabis-based medication in healthcare in the UK. We agree that this is the right time—if not long overdue—to review the scheduling of cannabis, and we are glad to hear that the policing Minister has spoken to Alfie Dingley’s mother. After the meeting in 10 Downing Street, she was very concerned about the length of time that it was taking to issue a suitable licence.

The Home Secretary has released some of the supply of medication that Billy Caldwell’s mother brought into the country, but does he intend to release the complete supply? Is he aware of the concern at the delays in the current process? Although we welcome the review, something must be done to manage the current process more effectively, including the use of an advisory panel. It is simply not acceptable that parents and families have to suffer, as they have been, as a result of the interminable delays in agreeing licences.

Cannabis and the drug issue generally are big issues of concern for the community. It is important that we base whatever we do on scientific fact and evidence, and we do not just bow to what might be popular sentiment. There are harms connected with cannabis consumption, but it is time to move forward and establish once and for all the potential of cannabis-based medicine to alleviate pain and suffering.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and her support for my statement. I think she agrees with me that it is absolutely the right time for the Government to look at this issue. She will be aware that under successive Governments, policy in this area has not changed for a long time, but given what we have all seen and heard all too clearly on our television screens, on the radio, and given the many meetings that my hon. Friend the policing Minister has had with the families affected, it is the right time to look at this issue and act as quickly as possible.

There are two parts to our action. I wish to reassure the House—all hon. Members will appreciate that rules of this type cannot be changed overnight. The changes have to be based on evidence. If they are not and are not properly made, some people out there may have different views and may try to challenge the rules legally. They have to be sufficiently robust. That is why we have put in place this process and why we wanted to act as quickly as possible. Professor Sally Davies’ office has said that she can complete her work within a week. We are moving as fast as we possibly can, and I hope that the ACMD can then act within weeks.

At the same time, we do not want any other families to suffer, so we want to ensure that we have a process in place to act much more swiftly. That is why we have established the expert panel. The chief medical officers from all the devolved nations, including Northern Ireland, are involved in that, so we are co-ordinating and will work well together. The expert panel will be able to act very swiftly and Ministers will be able to take action very quickly based on medical advice, which is what we all want to see.

The right hon. Lady asked me about Alfie Dingley. As I mentioned, we will be issuing the licence today. Alfie’s mother has already been informed and is of course very happy with the decision. I am sorry that she has had to wait so long and go through all the distress that she has faced. I am grateful to the policing Minister for all the work that he has done, and to Alfie’s mother’s Member of Parliament—the Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright)—for all the work that he has done.

The right hon. Lady asked me about Billy Caldwell’s situation. We are working very closely with the family. Now that the licence has been issued, we will ensure that the right amount of medicine is available for the right time. The situation depends somewhat on whether Billy Caldwell’s mother decides to go back to Northern Ireland, because licensing is an entirely devolved matter. We are
working closely with the Northern Ireland authorities to ensure that, if she does decide to go, the move is seamless and does not affect Billy Caldwell in any way.

The right hon. Lady is interested in how quickly we acted. The first time we received a request from a clinician in the case of Billy Caldwell was at around 11.15 am on Friday just gone; by noon I had issued a licence and the drug was in possession of the family. I do not believe that we could have acted any quicker from the point at which we received a request from the clinician.

Once again, let me say that I really appreciate the right hon. Lady’s comments. By working together, we can bring to an end the suffering of all these families and help in every way that we can.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the rapid way in which he has gripped this issue. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for drug policy reform, let me say that this is a very welcome step forward. There is a substantial amount of medical evidence out there, including a 2016 paper on this issue—commissioned by my predecessor co-chairs of the APPG—by Professor Mike Barnes, who has been associated with the Alfie Dingley case. Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that Professor Sally Davies has been given two tasks, including one on the expert panel to advise on immediate applications for licences? Will he confirm that people will not be asked to pay the swinging fees that were being asked of the Dingley family in respect of their licences? Finally, what is the expected timescale for the second task that my right hon. Friend has asked the chief medical officer to undertake?

Sajid Javid: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments, the work that he has done in this area over a number of years and the interest that he takes in the issue. I can confirm that Professor Sally Davies is helping—first with the expert panel so that we can bring help before the review is complete, and then of course with the review itself. He also mentioned the important issue of fees, which I am looking at to see how we can help.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. May I just gently say to him that it would be nice if the third party could have a little bit more advance notice than the statement literally being put in my hand as he gets to his feet? That said, I am pleased about the statement.

The Home Secretary is making significant progress in this area. I am particularly pleased for the individual families concerned, and to read about the review, but of course there are thousands of people across the United Kingdom who want to access these medicines for the treatment of conditions for which there is evidence that they can alleviate the symptoms and pain. These individuals and their families are worried about the bureaucracy and the hurdles that have to be crossed to access the medicines. Can the Secretary of State give me some assurance that his review will focus on removing bureaucracy and hurdles? Does he agree that this matter should eventually be seen as a public health matter that should be taken out of the Home Office and put into the hands of health departments across the UK?

In the meantime, I am pleased to hear that the chief medical officers of the devolved countries are involved, but will the Secretary of State confirm what other liaison there is—with the Scottish Government, for example—in relation to both health and policing, which has been mentioned, as these are devolved matters?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her comments. She is right to highlight that thousands of people may be suffering. No one knows the exact number, but it is estimated that at least 10,000 children in the UK have a drug-resistant form of epilepsy. That really puts into focus what a big difference these measures can make. I can also give her an assurance about bureaucracy and hurdles. Frankly, there has been a lot of bureaucracy and many hurdles in the way until now. The decision that we made on Friday was unprecedented, as are the measures that we are putting in place. The expert panel will make a huge difference. Its whole purpose is to make the process as smooth and quick as possible, based on medical advice at all points. I do not want to prejudge the review, but I am sure that the hon. and learned Lady can sense the direction.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cannabis: harmful effects on developing brains, I thank my right hon. Friend for his assurances that any future medicinal use of cannabis will not be conflated with any weakening of the Government’s position on recreational use. Is he aware of the increasingly clear evidence of permanent psychosis and depression among young people who are users of what we see on our streets more regularly—skunk cannabis?

Sajid Javid: I am very much aware of that. It is perfectly correct for my hon. Friend to highlight this point. As I made clear in my statement and I am happy to make absolutely clear again, there are no plans at all to decriminalise cannabis. It is a controlled class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, and that will not change.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): All of us must want children—and also adults—to get the medical treatment that they need without additional hurdles that have nothing to do with medicine. I welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement that he will look at the scheduling of cannabis, because it is incredibly hard to explain the scheduling classification of cannabis compared to opiates, and the additional burdens that scheduling poses for the health service if such products are needed for treatment. May I ask him again to look more widely at the barriers and obstacles in his review? Will he look at whether these kinds of scheduling or licensing decisions should be passed to the Department of Health and Social Care, and whether much more drugs policy should, in fact, be led by that Department?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady makes a number of good points. She is right to highlight that there are currently drugs that are under schedule 2, meaning that the medical benefits are accepted, but which can be a lot more harmful than other drugs if they are used in the wrong way. She asked about the role of the Department of Health and Social Care in these kinds of decisions. This requires a cross-Government approach, with the
Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care working closely together, as we have seen. We have an issue in that these drugs are categorised as illegal under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but we need to recognise, where appropriate, that some of them have medicinal benefits, as has already been recognised with, for example, cocaine and morphine. It is therefore appropriate that the two Departments work together.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I absolutely understand the Government’s review of this policy, and I welcome it for those who suffer and need this drug to make them better, but may I just say that, from my own life experience, I am delighted that the Government are not going to decriminalise the use of drugs. All too often, people start on cannabis and end on something far worse, and I have personally seen the devastation to families and the loss of children because of drugs.

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome the move that the Home Secretary has made, on behalf of my constituents. It is really important to me that the grandfather of Charlie Jones and the parents of Jace Newton-Sealey know how to go about applying for a licence. Will the Home Secretary and his Department make the process clear, so that people know how to access a licence?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I think that there is a need to make the process clearer. I have been quite open that I do not think that the current process is a friendly one at all. The decision made in the case of Billy Caldwell was unprecedented; no Government in the past had recognised the medicinal benefits of cannabis by making such a decision and issuing a licence. We need to make the process—even the interim process, through the expert panel—much smoother and more straightforward. Once the panel is set up, which will happen by next week, we will set out exactly how the process will work for the hon. Lady’s constituents and others.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Clinical leadership may have its place, but for years the crying need has been for political leadership, so may I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Policing Minister for providing it?

Sajid Javid: The Minister and I both thank my right hon. Friend.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I genuinely welcome this announcement, which does mark a significant shift, but is there not a dreadful hypocrisy in Government policy on drugs more generally? Probably most of the Cabinet drinks alcohol, the most dangerous drug of all. Probably half the Cabinet has used cannabis—maybe even the Home Secretary—unless it is a very odd group of people, but perhaps that is the case. Should not the Home Secretary follow the advice of the former Conservative leader, Lord Hague, who makes the case for a regulated, legalised market, which would be the best way to protect from harm people who, at the moment, buy from criminals who have no interest in their welfare at all?

Sajid Javid: This is about making sure that the best possible medical treatment is available for everyone in the UK, but especially our children. It is about medical treatment, not the recreational use of drugs, which can cause severe damage to people. I am afraid that I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman on that point, and nor, on this occasion, do I agree with Lord Hague.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for very much humanising this issue. As chairman of the all-party group on multiple sclerosis, I welcome his announcement about the medical aspect of cannabis. May I offer the services of the MS Society in any inquiry and call for evidence that he might have? May I also associate myself with his remarks about drugs? I am frankly staggered that my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Hague—or indeed anybody else—could advocate such a thing. We will all have seen at first hand in our constituencies the devastation that cannabis causes. This is not recreational use—it steals lives and futures, and we must be robust in ensuring that it stops.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that point. He will know that Sativex, which has a cannabis base, is already licensed for those with MS, but today’s announcement is about how we can improve on the medical use of cannabis even further.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I, too, genuinely welcome the licence for Alfie today, but what a scandal it is that it has taken three months since Hannah Deacon met the Prime Minister and was promised swift and compassionate action, and what an outrage it is that, frankly, it is only the press attention that has finally shamed the Government into action. With regard to the expert panel, what assurance can the Home Secretary give that there will be enough Home Office staff to deal with the thousands of applications that might well now come?

Sajid Javid: Let me say gently to the hon. Lady that in the case of Alfie Dingley, of course we are all pleased that we have been able to issue the licence today. She should know that before the application—the approach by his clinicians—no Government had even entertained the idea, given that cannabis is classed as a schedule 1 drug, of looking at this from a medical point of view. This Government have done that. I hope that she can join us in not just welcoming that, but working together on how we can end the suffering of so many other people, particularly children, who could benefit from these kinds of medicines.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary for his statement. I support the legalisation of cannabis for medical use. May I urge him to encourage the clinical review team to get on with it? There is already a mass of internationally accredited research available that they can draw on, so we do not need to reinvent the wheel. The research is there—it just needs to be studied and then a decision can be made quickly.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. One of the issues has been that our rules in this area have not kept up with medical research and evidence. At least 13 European countries, as well as Canada and over
30 US states, have recognised the medicinal benefits of cannabis. The World Health Organisation has also done work on this and pointed to evidence. We will be using and drawing on all that evidence. That is why I am pleased that Professor Sally Davies has said that she can complete her work in days.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Home Secretary says that he wants a system that works. I am bit concerned about the role of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs in the light of what has happened in recent days. Is it still fit for purpose?

Sajid Javid: Yes, it is. It has an important role to play, which is to advise Ministers on the scheduling of drugs. If we are to change a scheduling, it is important to listen to its point of view.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Home Secretary set out at the start of his statement that “cannabis can harm people’s mental and physical health and damage communities.” I also welcome the fact that any change will be science-led. Will he also look at international examples? He mentioned Canada, where a law was introduced very recently. Will he see what works—and, importantly, what does not work—with that law, in particular, because the evidence is mixed?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will certainly be looking at international evidence. A lot has changed in the UK since the current rules were put in place, and we will take all that into account.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Home Secretary has said today. I have long supported decriminalisation of the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes, not least having heard some really heartbreaking stories from my own constituents, particularly those with degenerative conditions, some of whom, sadly, passed away unable to get the pain relief and support that they needed. Given the speed at which this review will be undertaken, will the Home Secretary, the Policing Minister and the Attorney General be giving any guidance in the interim to police forces or the Crown Prosecution Service on the public interest in pursuing the impounding of material, or prosecuting individuals who are using it for medicinal purposes?

Sajid Javid: The current rules are clear. We have discussed today and debated in Parliament how we would like to see a change in the process, but until those rules change, they would have to be applied. The hon. Gentleman raises a perfectly good point about working with law enforcement agencies and making sure that they are taking emerging policy into account.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I have long advocated the use of medical cannabis and therefore very much welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement of a review. May I have assurances that that review will be very much patient-centred and led by evidence of how the use of medical cannabis can help those with chronic conditions?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that reassurance. The review must have the patient at its very heart and must be driven by medical evidence.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and particularly the news on Alfie Dingley. Of course, there is already evidence of the medical benefits of cannabis, because otherwise Sativex would not be available on licence. That is why it is so absurd that cannabis is still a schedule 1 controlled drug. I am therefore hopeful and confident that the review will lead to a recommendation to reschedule. Will the Secretary of State confirm that rescheduling could be carried out quite quickly and easily by means of a statutory instrument, meaning that we can get on with it?

Sajid Javid: First, Sativex was looked at for a particular condition. It is right that drugs are looked at the context of the condition that they are intended to help with. The hon. Gentleman makes a good wider point about whether, once the review is complete, we can get on with it, with any changes made quickly. That is exactly what I intend to do.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): As chairman of the all-party group on 22ql1.2 deletion syndrome, I know many parents of children who have a rare genetic condition that often goes undiagnosed and, when diagnosed, is not always appropriately treated. From that experience, I am sure that Billy’s family welcome today’s statement. I welcome the fact that elements of the statement show that the Government look to the evidence and respond to the public interest, as well as that of the patient at the forefront.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right. The process should absolutely be clinically led. We should listen to evidence from clinicians while drawing on international evidence, too. That is exactly what should feed into the outcome of the review.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think we all welcome the progress that is being made, but there are questions about people who need help now. My constituents Laura Murray and John Ahern have a one-year-old daughter, Bláthnaid, who has been diagnosed with Aicardi syndrome. She suffers very severe seizures throughout the day and her parents believe that these medicines could help. I will write to the Home Secretary with more details about that situation, but may I ask him how much discretion he still has, and how much he is willing to exercise?

Sajid Javid: As the rules stand, until the review is complete and changes are made, any use of cannabis for medicinal purposes will require a Home Office licence or, in the case of Northern Ireland, a licence from the Health Department there. I hope that what I have set out today has given reassurance that I recognise the need for action now, not tomorrow or in a few weeks or months. We need action now, and that is the purpose of the expert panel—to make this a much smooth, quick and clinically-led process.
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement. I note that he is not going to reclassify cannabis, but will he look at how we deal with individuals in possession of a small amount of cannabis? To that end, will he look at Checkpoint, an alternative justice initiative by Durham police that aims to help individuals and to try to break the link between drugs and crime?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is right: this is not about the reclassification of cannabis. He makes an important point about the need for law enforcement to work with others, including the many good groups out there, to try to get people off drugs once they have a problem. It is important to do more work on that.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement. Those treating my constituent, Caroline, are firmly of the view that she is alive today and living a good quality of life because her brain tumour has been slowed by the regular use of cannabis oil, but she is having to import that at a cost of hundreds of pounds every month. When can she expect her doctors to be able to prescribe that treatment? Is there anything she should be doing in the meantime to benefit from what the Secretary of State has announced today?

Sajid Javid: I do not know all the details of that case, but it might be good to look at the work of the expert panel that I have talked about. As I say, we will set out more details on that. Any changes to the rules will be made after the review and, as the House has heard, we are trying to do that as quickly as possible.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The mainstream media have highlighted this week the heartbreaking cases of Alfie Dingley and Billy Caldwell. The Secretary of State has said that an estimated 10,000 children in the UK who suffer seizures could benefit from these medicines, as could many more people suffering from degenerative conditions. It has always been the case that he could grant a specific licence, but given his comments about the time that it will take the ACMD to reach a conclusion and to look at international evidence from Canada and the 13 EU countries, what is his estimate of how long it will be before we get a more streamlined system?

Sajid Javid: First, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we will take the international evidence into account. I know that Dame Sally Davies will look at that too, as will the ACMD. I want that work to be done as soon as possible, but right now I want to streamline the process, which means that the work of the expert panel will be very important.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. It will be particularly welcomed by my constituents the Gray family, as Murray Gray suffers from a similar condition to Alfie Dingley and Billy Caldwell. I also welcome the speed with which the Home Secretary will act, but I urge him not to be thrown off track or to allow anything to affect the rescheduling of cannabis, such as reactionary fear about its availability for recreational use.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and I reassure her that I will not be thrown off track.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary very much for his statement and the urgency he has given this. I also thank the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service for all his hard work, which should not be ignored. My constituents Darren and Danielle Gibson took their eight-year-old daughter Sophia to Holland so that she could receive these drugs. It was very important that they did so, as that had a clear medical benefit for their child. The Minister will know—

Mr Speaker: Order. I express the cautious hope—it would probably be unrealistic of me to say this with enormous confidence—that the hon. Gentleman, whom we all love dearly, is approaching his peroration, at the end of which there will be an unmistakable question mark.

Jim Shannon: There certainly will be, Mr Speaker.

When I met the permanent secretary of the Health Department in Northern Ireland, he said that he would have some difficulty giving the go-ahead in Northern Ireland. He needs direction from the Home Secretary. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with the permanent secretary to facilitate this urgently for my constituent Sophia Gibson?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that the decision to issue a possession licence is completely devolved in Northern Ireland, so it is outside the Home Office’s area. That said, we want to work closely with Northern Ireland. The permanent secretary in my Department has been working with the permanent secretary in the Health Department in Northern Ireland. We want to help in every way possible, especially in the case of Sophia Gibson, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I have to say that I am a little perplexed by this. The Home Secretary is saying that there are currently no legally recognised medicinal or therapeutic benefits of cannabis. I am wondering what we are giving to Billy Caldwell that has led to such a turnaround in his situation and what we are proposing to give to Alfie Dingley, if it has no therapeutic benefits.

Sajid Javid: Under the current rules, those are not recognised. To be a bit clearer, all drugs that may or may not have a medicinal benefit are scheduled, and drugs in schedule 1, which is where cannabis is at the moment, are not recognised to have medicinal benefits under the law. That said, we of course want to look at the evidence, and to be led by evidence and clinicians, which was exactly why I made today’s announcement and why I took action last week.
Points of Order

1.36 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Where is everybody? I hope, in the light of the extraordinary accusations of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), they are not behind the bike sheds having a spliff.

Mr Speaker: That is a most unworthy thought. The right hon. Gentleman articulates it with his usual brio and panache, but I think he errs on the side of pessimism in his assessment of the character of his colleagues.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday I attempted to raise a point of order, which I do not think was a point of order, so I will try again today. I wonder how I can get on the record how thrilled I am, along with colleagues across the House, that it will no longer be necessary to go to Holland to get the drugs for Alfie Dingley. I was inundated with requests to come with me, but we will now not have to be put behind bars to get Alfie the drugs he needs.

Mr Speaker: That is a very heartwarming point of order by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said, “26 October 2018, unless the Speaker can get him a better time.” That is a very novel interpretation of the procedure.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Please, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: He is exhorting me to find a better time.

Frank Field: It is about the abolition of the House of Lords. They are overruling us.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Gentleman may be investing me with powers that it be would joyous to have, but which I do not possess. The House seems to be in a good mood at the moment.

BILL PRESENTED

HOUSE OF LORDS (ABOLITION AND REPLACEMENT)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Frank Field presented a Bill to abolish the House of Lords and make provision for its replacement by a Senate.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 230).

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of others, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said, “26 October 2018, unless the Speaker can get him a better time.” That is a very novel interpretation of the procedure.
Representation of the People (Gibraltar)

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

1.39 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for the representation of Gibraltar by a Member of the House of Commons; and for connected purposes.

All 14 of the UK’s overseas territories are different; all are special. All share our monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, as their Head of State; most are internally self-governing. The overseas territory that now sits in a unique constitutional position post-Brexit is Gibraltar. It is the only territory within the European Union and will be leaving the EU with the UK on 29 March 2019. Its relationship with the European Union is quite different from any other part of the Union, in that it is a member of the single market, but not its customs union or Schengen, despite having a land border with the EU. Gibraltar is not to be confused with the Crown dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, which have very different constitutional arrangements and are not in the EU, now or in the future.

Few were surprised that Gibraltar voted remain in the EU referendum. This reflected its residents’ concerns that the EU had played, at times, a role in balancing the often fractious demands of its giant neighbour. The good life and strong economy—a beacon in an area of high regional unemployment—I can but guess also played a part in its local vote for no change.

For over 300 years, Gibraltar and its people have played their part in support of Britain’s history as a global leader in commerce and an international player of influence. It occupies a unique geographical position as the gatekeeper to the Mediterranean and has one of the Royal Navy’s most important international bases. Whenever Gibraltar has been presented with a choice over its future, notably in the shared sovereignty referendum of 2002, Gibraltarians have rejected any change by vast margins. Gibraltar has been and continues to be an unwavering supporter of the UK. Its outstanding support during times of conflict has been continuous, and we have a close relationship built on trust and reciprocal loyalty. Similarly, the people of Gibraltar have strong support in this House. I salute the good work of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the overseas territories, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar.

Since the decision to leave the EU, the people of Gibraltar and its Government have shown nothing but pragmatism and respect for the decision of the referendum. Nobody could fail to be impressed and reassured by the evidence given by the Chief Minister to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union in January last year. The UK’s Brexit vote must make us think anew and re-assert once more that the Rock is British and will remain so. Brexit provides us with an opportunity to build further on our relationship and further protect the Rock’s rights and interests. That is best guaranteed by a closer electoral bond, which would also send a clear message to Madrid about the perpetuity of that bond.

Unlike other overseas territories, Gibraltar does not have the option of formal independence; which, however unlikely, would be available to others should they so wish it. The 1713 treaty of Utrecht ceded Gibraltar to Great Britain in perpetuity. The treaty had a sting, in that Gibraltar can only be British or Spanish. Its own unilateral independence is not an option. Whereas most overseas territories have their own currencies or shared currencies—the Eastern Caribbean dollar, under the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union—or use the euro in some cases or the US or New Zealand dollar, only the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar and St Helena, with Tristan da Cunha and Ascension Island, share sterling as their domestic currency.

Gibraltar’s truly unique feature, however, is that it already has electoral links with the UK, via its attachment to the South West region for representation in the European Parliament. That will disappear upon Brexit. The way to protect that attachment is for this Parliament to allow the people of Gibraltar direct representation in this House. There was a cogent argument given then that Gibraltar should be connected to the UK through electoral representation, and there is a clear argument now. Gibraltar’s population is a little light numerically to qualify as a constituency. It has a population of 33,000, with an electoral roll of 23,000. However, this is in the same ball park as—I may need help pronouncing this—Na h-Eileanan an Iar in the Outer Hebrides, a constituency with 21,260 voters.

Of course, we will always respect the devolution of powers that are in place, and having a Gibraltar MP in this House should not be an impediment to Gibraltar’s future constitutional development. Gibraltar’s constitution of 2006 is a tribute to the fact that it has a vibrant and responsible democratic system of government. That is why my Bill would not change the devo-max settlement of its 2006 constitution. If taken further, it would not impose a Westminster MP on Gibraltar. The decision whether to take up the offer of an MP in Westminster for Gibraltar must be made by the residents of Gibraltar alone and decided by their own internal procedures. The mechanics of how that might work would need to be discussed with Gibraltar’s leaders, but I reiterate that it would be for the people of Gibraltar to decide whether to have such representation here in our Parliament, which would become their own.

There is a local campaign group in Gibraltar, called the Representation in Westminster Group, that has been arguing for a number of years that a democratically elected MP in Westminster can only strengthen the Rock’s link with Britain and act as a permanent counter to any Spanish claims. The campaign says that it has already collected almost 9,000 signatures in support of UK Parliament representation, which it will deliver here once 10,000 signatures have been amassed. That is an impressive number—close to half the eligible voters.

As we leave the EU and forge a new global Britain, and given the Rock’s unique constitutional position with its membership of the sterling zone and rich historical links to Britain, this is perhaps the most appropriate time to cement our relationship with Gibraltar by offering it this constitutional bond. It would signal a perpetual and lasting link of shared interests. Gibraltar may be
[Craig Mackinlay]
small, but its success is a matter of pride for the British
people. Gibraltar’s constitution gives its citizens full
powers of self-governance, other than over foreign affairs,
defence, internal security and interest rate monetary
policy. Gibraltar has always been and will continue to
be a good and true member of the great British family. I
very much hope that with this Bill we can reward the
Gibraltarian people for their steadfast and loyal support
for Britain.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Craig Mackinlay, Sir Graham Brady, Maria
Caulfield, Sir David Crausby, Tim Farron, Daniel
Kawczynski, Priti Patel, Andrew Rosindell, Sammy Wilson
and Nigel Dodds present the Bill.

Craig Mackinlay accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on
Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 231).

Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport

1.49 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has no confidence in the Secretary of State for
Transport, the Rt Hon Member for Epsom and Ewell; notes the
failed implementation of the May rail timetables which has left
thousands of commuters without services and has drastically
affected their everyday lives; believes Northern and Govia Thameslink
Railway should have their franchises terminated; and regrets that
the Secretary of State for Transport has failed to strategically
manage and oversee the UK railway and take responsibility for
his role in the crisis on England’s railways, whilst officials at other
organisations have resigned and forgone bonuses.

Before I come to the topic of today’s debate, I would
like to express my condolences to the families and
friends of those who so sadly died as a result of being
struck by a train at Loughborough Junction in south
London yesterday. I also pay tribute to all the railway
staff who attended in response, in particular the British
Transport police. Despite the challenges we face, we can
never forget the outstanding public service that tens of
thousands of men and women provide every day. We
owe it to them to do our very best for the industry.

I regret having to table the motion, but given the
totally unacceptable state of the railway I felt that I had
a duty to passengers. The latest chaos follows meltdown
on the east coast, resulting in a £2 billion bail-out and
huge cuts to promised electrification in Wales, the north
of England and the midlands. This is not shaping up to
be a distinguished legacy. In his resignation letter to
staff, Charles Horton, the outgoing chief executive of
Govia Thameslink Railway, said:

“In my view, this was an industry-wide failure of the timetabling
process. But with leadership comes responsibility and so I feel it is
only right that I step down”.

Why is it that the chief executive of a train company
who is responsible only for the travel disruption on one
part of the railway is able to recognise the responsibility
that comes with his leadership role and resign, yet the
person who is truly responsible, the Transport Secretary,
remains in post?

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does
my hon. Friend agree that, ever since the collapse of the
west coast main line franchising competition under a
predecessor of the Secretary of State, the entire franchising
system has become increasingly ridiculous and unworkable,
and that the way in which we run our railways needs to
be changed entirely?

Andy McDonald: I could not agree more. We are
seeing instance after instance. It is evidence, if any more
were needed, that the system has completely and utterly
failed and needs to be completely revised. Why are train
companies allowed to retain their franchise despite
repeated failures? Northern and GTR should be stripped
of their contracts. Labour said very clearly that franchise
failure should mean forfeit. It is clear that the Department for Transport has failed to ensure that train companies fulfil the terms of their contracts.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not only GTR that should lose its franchise? The Secretary of State should have his office removed as well because this is a façade of a franchise. We know that Ministers are behind it, and it is Ministers who should be held accountable for the fact that passengers in places such as Preston Park in Brighton are losing their jobs, cannot spend time with their kids in hospital and are having their lives wrecked.

Andy McDonald: I agree entirely. The Government seem to want to have control and intervene, but they do not want to take responsibility. GTR should have been stripped of its contract years ago for running the worst rail service in modern times. The company has repeatedly been found in breach of its contract as well as overseeing toxic industrial relations and poor customer service. Had the Government heeded Labour’s call to strip the company of its franchise, the recent disruption could have been avoided.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) rose—

Andy McDonald: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman—he is always kind and courteous with his time. A month ago, I believe that he said at the Dispatch Box that the rail professionals should be allowed to get on and run the industry, but in this instance he is being critical of the Secretary of State for not intervening and stopping that very eventuality occurring. I would like some clarification.

Andy McDonald: I will come on to that. As an excellent member of the Select Committee on Transport, the hon. Gentleman knows that the DFT sits on those bodies—it has a presence—yet it did nothing when it was given those alarms or warnings that he knows all about.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andy McDonald: I shall give way briefly, as I want to make progress.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): It is not many months since we had a problem with Southern, as has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). From time to time there are problems on the west coast main line, yet the Secretary of State sits there like Pontius Pilate and abdicates responsibility.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend make the point wisely and accurately.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a good speech. Yesterday, members of the Transport Committee sat for many hours interrogating leaders of the industry, both train operating companies and Network Rail, trying to find out who runs the railways. After all those hours, answer came there none. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are two scenarios? First, the Secretary of State is in charge, in which case he should take responsibility; or even worse, he is not, in which case he should be sacked?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes the point very well. We are talking about a dysfunctional railway that is completely and utterly fractured, and that has to be resolved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andy McDonald: I will make progress, as I have taken several interventions and I know that many speakers wish to contribute. It is not acceptable to allow companies to continue to run and profit from rail services following failures on this scale. Services should return to public ownership to be run as part of an integrated railway under public ownership.

I turn to the distressing situation that confronts us more broadly on the railway as a result of the calamitous introduction of new timetables across more than half the UK rail network. The changes were intended to be improvements to introduce much-needed rail capacity following public expenditure on new rail infrastructure, but instead of improvements passengers on Northern and GTR have experienced a nightmare of disruption, and there seems to be little prospect of their trials and tribulations ending quickly. Last week, the Manchester Evening News carried a number of personal testimonies about the impact of the chaos. Leigh Burke, 55, is a team leader at Royal Bolton Hospital. He commutes from Didsbury to Bolton and said:

“I’m late to work all the time, it’s affecting my job. It’s an utter shambles.”

Louise Kirby, who commutes daily from Bromley Cross to Victoria, added:

“It’s horrific. I keep having panic attacks because it’s been so crowded. I saw a man pass out.”

Tom Moss, 24, a PR manager who lives in Glossop and works in Altrincham, pays £104 a month for his pass and said:

“I just want the trains to be on time. I just feel angry. I can’t take much more of it.”

There are thousands more personal stories that I could describe: personal difficulties and struggles that have a significant social and economic impact. Businesses and individuals who rely on rail transport suffer consequences from this disruption that carry very real costs.

This is not just a one-off. Disruption of this scale and severity, particularly when passengers experience it endlessly over an extended period, destroys faith and trust in the railway and drives people away from rail into their cars. Last week, figures showed that rail passenger usage has fallen yet again—this time, the fall was the biggest in 25 years. Not only does that mean more congestion, worse air pollution and an increased contribution to climate change, but it threatens the very sustainability of the railway.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as appalling oversight by the Government, one of the main challenges facing the rail network is ageing and unreliable infrastructure? That is a particular problem for the east coast main line, which has not had any real investment since electrification in 1991, 27 years ago, despite its being one of the major national rail routes.
Andy McDonald: Indeed. The east coast main line is in need of investment, and my hon. Friend makes her point incredibly well.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) rose—

Andy McDonald: I will give way once more, then I must make progress.

Tim Farron: That is very decent of the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful to him. He is making an important speech. Does he agree that there is something of the red herring about conversations suggesting the new timetable is the source of the current calamity? Does he also agree that strategic decisions by the Government have led to the problem, which predates timetabling, not least the decision to postpone or, in the case of the Lakes line, cancel electrification, and to award to Northern certain franchises that it should never have been given, including the Lakes and Furness lines in my constituency?

Andy McDonald: I agree with those comments, and I will come on to that in a little while.

Franchise agreements assume ever-growing fare revenues, so the downturn in rail use increases the likelihood of more failed franchises and further taxpayer bail-outs. Fares have soared at three times the rate of wages since 2010, pricing passengers off the railway, while disruption encourages more people to revert to driving. That is exactly the wrong modal shift that we need our transport policy to achieve if it is to fulfil our environmental obligations and remove traffic and fumes from our towns and cities. Polling conducted by Which? found that three in five respondents affected by the timetable changes said that those changes had a negative impact on both their work and family life, with four in 10 saying that they had a negative impact on their health.

Considering the scale of the disruption, I am sure the whole House will agree that passengers must be adequately compensated. Yet at present 72% of those affected by the disruption said they had not been informed, either on the train or at the platform, about any compensation they may be entitled to receive. The Transport Secretary should have ensured passengers were made properly aware of the compensation they are owed. In addition, considering the scale of the disruption, a compensation package that goes above and beyond what is currently available must be delivered. The Transport Secretary has indicated some such package is being considered, but he has not provided detail. I ask him to do so today to ensure that the amount of compensation is commensurate with the scale of disruption and, importantly, that it is funded by the train companies, not taxpayers and passengers. They should pay voluntarily. If they refuse, he should make them.

It is important to step back and review the key steps in how we have come to this sorry state of affairs. This year’s timetable changes, introduced on 20 May, are the most extensive and ambitious undertaken in decades. More than 50% of the network schedules have been revamped. Four million trains have been retimed: about six times as many changes as is usual for a timetable change. It was clear before Christmas that there were going to be difficulties in implementing the new timetable. In February, the rail industry body, the Rail Delivery Group, confirmed it would not be able to complete timetables 12 weeks ahead of travel from 20 May for about six months. That should have set off alarm bells.

Since 20 May, 43% of Northern’s trains have been delayed or cancelled each day. From 4 June, the train operator cancelled 165 trains a day, including all services to the Lakes district. In the first week of the new timetable, GTR delayed or cancelled a quarter of its trains and announced the schedule for the next day at 10 pm each night.

Today’s industrial action on Northern is a reminder of the utter despair felt by the rail industry’s workforce. Both Northern and GTR have waged war on their staff for three years and four years respectively. They have done so at the explicit behest of the Secretary of State for Transport and his senior officials.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): How does the hon. Gentleman explain that the Labour Mayor of London has been unable to run strike-free transport in London, although he promised to do so? Did he also anger staff in this way?

Andy McDonald: We can have that discussion, but today I am dealing with these services and I am going to concentrate on them.

Senior officials directly interfered. Let us not forget that the managing director of passenger services at the Department for Transport, Peter Wilkinson, said two years ago:

“we’re going to be having punch-ups and we will see industrial action”

and that he wanted to run people “out of my industry.”

The introduction of the May 2018 timetable required change on an unprecedented scale. The process of managing change requires co-operation, dialogue, engagement and good will. The Government and the management of Northern and GTR have destroyed their relationships with their employees. Millions of passengers in the UK are paying the price for the belligerence and the antagonistic approach of the Secretary of State.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know the Secretary of State and I know his Ministers. I bet a pound to a dollar that the Secretary of State and his Ministers pulled in the people responsible for the railway companies and got assurances from them that this would work well. I really feel it is quite unfair, because I am absolutely convinced that the Secretary of State, who I know well, would have checked this out. He has been let down very badly by the railway companies.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, but in support of my argument. He is demonstrating that that did not work. That was not a very good way of going about business, relying on people giving assurances rather than saying, “Show me. Where’s your evidence?” You do that before you go ahead with it. You do not rely on people telling you nonsense.

Ever since the timetable chaos arose, we have witnessed carefully crafted statements that try to ensure as little responsibility as possible can be attributed to the Department for Transport and the Secretary of State in charge of it. Let us consider the situation. This is a Government who refuse to recognise the accumulated evidence that their privatised structure of the railway is failing. Therefore, they refuse to accept a sensible and practical railway structure that can function properly.
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. He is a big supporter of privatisation—[Interruption.] He is a big supporter of nationalisation, but that would cost each and every household in this country £6,500. Does he not agree that the nationalised side of the railway caused this problem in the first place? How does he account for that?

Andy McDonald: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman gets that figure from. If the Government take franchises back when they run out it costs diddly squat to take them back—zero—so he is talking utter nonsense.

No one other than the Government hold responsibility for their dogmatic stance. This dogma causes them to stand by and defend the rail structure that is manifestly not fit for purpose. It then falls to the Department for Transport to get involved to try to run the railway properly. It cannot do this. Today’s railway cannot run itself effectively because it was decapitated by privatisation and chopped into bits to facilitate private profit taking. Because there is no guiding mind overseeing the railway, the Department has to wade into the railway much more deeply than it should. Having taken this approach, the Government assume a greater deal of responsibility, but they have not shown themselves capable of discharging that responsibility.

The Department for Transport’s oversight has failed in three major ways. First, it appears that, when there was a decision on whether to press ahead with the timetable changes affecting Northern, the Department stood against allowing a deferral. Why did the Department not believe the professional advice it was given? Secondly, the Transport Committee heard from Network Rail yesterday that Thameslink phasing was first raised by the GTR readiness board in June 2017. Mr Halsall, the route managing director for the south-east, said the Department stood by and did not make a decision until November 2017—an astonishing five-month delay. What did the Secretary of State know and when did he know it?

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I can confirm that the decision to proceed with a slimmed down timetable was taken by me in July 2017.

Andy McDonald: Well, I am saying to the Secretary of State quite clearly that a competent Secretary of State would have known this right at the outset and taken the appropriate steps. He did not. He allowed the situation to unwind.

Thirdly, the Thameslink industry readiness board—readiness board, there’s a laugh—formally requested that the GTR timetable changes should be scaled back, yet the Department dithered for two months. GTR boss Mr Horton said the board did not have an executive role so he could not explain who was responsible for the meltdown—no one accountable and no one responsible.

I do not want to personalise the issue and I do not expect the Secretary of State to know every detail of what happens in his Department—[Interruption.] No, it is just everything he does and everything he stands for; it’s nothing personal. However, the three points I have described are all important failures of the Department for Transport at a high level. Stephen Glaister from the Office for Rail and Road is not an appropriate person to conduct a review into the timetable failings. The ORR itself has failed in its regulation of Network Rail, so it cannot be expected to conduct an independent investigation. This is yet another bad judgment by the Secretary of State for Transport. A new rail timetable is due to be implemented in December 2018. What funds, resources and support will the Secretary of State provide to ensure Network Rail’s planning capability can deliver the changes due in six months?

Today’s Financial Times reports the managing director of Trenitalia complaining about Network Rail and, in particular, the lack of integration between Network Rail and the train operating companies since privatisation. Did the Italians not do their homework on the reality of the UK’s railway? Recent events demonstrate more than ever that our railway is not integrated. I am afraid that the breach of faith and trust is so great that the Secretary of State’s credibility will never recover. There comes a point when the publicly accountable politician in charge of the railway should step up and shoulder the blame. It seems to me, and I suspect to many rail users, that we have more than reached that point.

2.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Before I respond to the points raised by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), can I just say a couple of things? First, I saw the comments that he made yesterday, and I thought he was very brave on the whole issue of medicinal cannabis—I pay tribute to him for what they did.

Situations like this from time to time. I am very grateful to the British Transport police in particular and to staff across the railway who deal with horrendous situations like this from time to time. I am very grateful to them for what they did.

For years, the Opposition have demanded that the railways be renationalised and run by the Government, and they have claimed that they would be run much better if they were. Now it appears that they think the railways are already run by the Government, and that if something goes wrong, it is down to us. Frankly, I am going to let their confusion speak for itself and concentrate today on what really matters: getting things back into shape for passengers.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: I will give way once or twice during my speech, but as you said, Madam Deputy Speaker, we need to make progress so that people get a chance to contribute. I am going to make some progress before I give way.

As I previously told the House, over the past weeks, passengers on parts of the GTR and Northern franchises have faced totally unsatisfactory levels of service, and I apologise to passengers that have experienced and are experiencing disruption. Since the timetable has been
introduced, my Department and the industry have been working round the clock to restore the reliability of the service across the network. Hour by hour, my officials are in contact with GTR, Northern and Network Rail to work to improve the service to passengers.

As I told the House, I have commissioned an independent inquiry. This will be led by the independent rail regulator, Stephen Glaister, to examine why we are in this situation and to avoid it ever happening again. I have met the owners of the franchises and demanded that they improve their operational response, including, in the case of GTR, increasing its managerial capacity. Clearly, nobody wants us to be in the position we find ourselves in today, but let me be absolutely clear: everyone in my Department is as focused as we possibly can be on improving reliability for passengers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).  

Tim Farron: The Secretary of State will be aware that for two weeks in my constituency, there were no services at all along the Lake district—the service into Britain’s second biggest visitor destination. It took a heritage charter train to provide any service over the past few days, and I very much thank all those who were involved in making that happen. Does he agree that this is perhaps a sign that Northern, which is such a colossal franchise across the whole of the north of England, needs to be looked at in a more micro way? For example, we need to look at Cumbria and decide whether the Furness line, the coastal line and the Lakes line could instead be a separate franchise run by a provider that actually wants to run trains on a train line.

Chris Grayling: At the end of all this, I rule nothing out as regards the future structure of franchises. I obviously want to see the Lakes line recover to a normal service as quickly as possible. It has been a disappointment, actually, that the working practices between the employer and ASLEF have meant that it has not been possible to run a conventional service. That may seem extraordinary, but the employer agreements require that if one driver is taken off for training, all the drivers have to be. That is a strange situation. The Labour party talks about wanting to help passengers; it could put a bit of pressure on their union friends to relax some of those agreements now, so that we get the services back into shape as quickly as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I give way to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald).

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know of the misery—because I have told him—on my line, with five stations where people’s lives have been blighted over recent weeks, but does he agree that privatisation does have one merit, which is that we can get rid of the operator if there is a huge crisis, and if this is not sorted out very soon, will he take the necessary steps to attack the franchise?

Chris Grayling: I am absolutely clear that that is the case. Indeed, as I will say in a moment, I have started the process of review to make sure that all options are open.

Several hon. Members rise—

Chris Grayling: I will take two more interventions; then I will make some progress.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. The network is incredibly complicated, with a whole range of different providers, both publicly and privately owned. Does he understand that passengers look to the Government in their role of overseeing all the different providers? We do not have an independent board, with a chair and non-executives who scrutinise, challenge and support the network; we look to him as Secretary of State and to the Department. He is entirely reactive and not entirely proactive, which is what passengers need. Does he not accept some responsibility for what has happened—for the lack of oversight, the lack of scrutiny and the lack of challenge while this was happening, rather than just reacting afterwards?

Chris Grayling: I say very simply that the Labour party argues that the railway should be run by the rail experts. When the rail experts advise, as they did in early May, that they are ready for the timetable change—the train companies and Network Rail—it behoves Ministers to take the advice of those rail professionals. Labour is now saying that we should overrule the very people that it said, a few weeks ago, should be running the railways.

Several hon. Members rise—

Chris Grayling: I will give way one more time, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon).

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am really grateful to my right hon. Friend. On the review, whatever the ownership, these are essential public services—in getting our constituents to work and getting their children to school—so will he consider taking stronger powers for himself in times of disruption that would allow him to direct the rail operators to work more closely together or to put in additional stops to help those who simply cannot get to work in the morning?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely; I agree with my right hon. Friend. This is something that we will have to look at very seriously indeed. There are many lessons to learn from all this, but most immediately, we need to get services back into place for passengers. I have been watching the issues at Eynsford and Shoreham in his constituency. It feels as though they are getting a better service than they were but there is still some way to go, and we need to make sure that that is covered.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Caroline Lucas: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: I will make some progress before I give way again.
I would like to update the House on how the industry is working to improve the reliability of services. On 4 June, Northern introduced a temporary timetable, including a targeted reduction in trains by around 6% to achieve a more deliverable service. Even with this reduction in service, there are still more trains running across the whole Northern network than before the timetable change in May. That does not mean that there are not individual areas that still have very significant problems, and I am very conscious that many passengers are still experiencing significant disruption, but there are signs that the service is stabilising. Over the first two weeks of the reduced timetable, 80% of trains arrived on time and 4% were cancelled or arrived significantly late, which is a significant improvement. This is not nearly good enough, but it is an improvement on what was happening before the introduction of that timetable. Northern is planning to run the timetable until the end of July, when it will review and, we hope, significantly increase the number of trains running, while ensuring continued stability. Stability is the most important thing for passengers so that they know what is expected, when trains are going to come and that they are going to come.

Officials from the Rail North Partnership—it is worth reminding Labour Members that this franchise is managed as a partnership between my Department and the leaders of local authorities in the north. Decisions about it are taken by the partnership board of Transport for the North, and it has been considering how to respond—[Interruption.] The shadow Secretary of State says it does not exist. This is the most devolved franchise in England. Responsibilities for managing and overseeing the franchise are shared through the board of Transport for the North—[Interruption.] Labour Members do not like it, but that is the truth.

GTR is also working to increase the predictability and reliability of journeys on its network. It is working actively to reduce the number of on-the-day cancellations and is now updating its timetables a week ahead. There is clearly still a lot more to do. In too many places, there is very significant disruption, but we have to move things in the right direction. Alternative travel arrangements are in place—for example, for passengers on the Brighton main line, who can have their Thameslink tickets accepted on Gatwick Express. Next month, GTR will introduce a full temporary timetable across its network as the next step to improve reliability and performance for passengers. This will allow GTR to slowly build up services to the new full timetable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will take two more interventions, and then I will make progress to the end of my remarks so that I do not take up too much speaking time.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will remember that we met on 4 June, when I relayed some of the real issues that my constituents in Oldham and Saddleworth were facing. He said that we should be seeing improvements to the emergency timetable. I said that I would hold him to it, and he also said that he would look at contingency arrangements if there were not improvements. I went back to Greenfield station last Friday and spoke to constituents who use those trains. They said that they had seen only marginal differences, so will the Secretary of State now commit to bringing these franchises—Northern and TransPennine Express—in-house, and will he ensure that there is compensation for TPE passengers as well?

Chris Grayling: I will talk about compensation in a moment. I have been watching the performance carefully, and there have been some signs of stabilisation, as I say, but there is still a long way to go. [Interruption.] As I just set out, we have seen some stabilisation. I have been looking at the services day by day, and there is still a way to go, but the decline we saw after the timetable change has at least been arrested, and as the hon. Lady herself admits, there have been some improvements, although not nearly enough. I accept that, and I will take away her comments and look carefully at her line again, but there has been at least a stabilisation.

Caroline Lucas rose—

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) rose—

Chris Grayling: I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend and I share a railway line, the Wessex route, which is under the stewardship of South Western Railway. It will be introducing a new timetable later this year. How will he ensure that the learnings from his independent inquiry are used to inform the implementation of the new timetable to avoid a replication of these sorts of problems in the future?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend makes an important point—indeed, the shadow Secretary of State said the same. We will not go through with a timetable change in December that is not deliverable. A lot of working is being done right now to see what can and cannot be done. These problems cannot and will not be allowed to happen again. We also have new leadership at Network Rail. Andrew Haines, its new chief executive, stewarded the last major timetable change on the south-western network a decade ago, which went very smoothly. Andrew will be personally responsible for ensuring that any timetable change is deliverable.

I turn now to what happens next. We have seen some stabilisation on the Northern franchise, but I have yet to see any sign that GTR is getting to grips with the issue, so I have commissioned a formal review of the franchise to establish whether it has met and continues to meet its contractual obligations in the planning and delivery of the May timetable, including by ensuring sufficient capability and competence inside the group, and—it importantly—to ensure that the owning groups invest sufficiently to minimise further disruption.

My main objective is to ensure there is a plan that I can have confidence in going forward. The review will inform my decisions about how to best use my enforcement powers and the next steps I can take with the owners of the franchise if they are found to be in breach of their obligations. Northern is a matter of ongoing discussion at the Transport for the North board. It has made progress, but not enough, and that is being closely monitored indeed.
The one thing on which I agree with the shadow Secretary of State is the need to put passengers first, and there are two areas where we have to work on that. I encourage all sections of the industry, including the trade unions, to put passengers first. Railway workers across the country are dedicated to providing a high level of service for their passengers and have been on the frontline facing the anger of passengers affected by the timetable disruption, and I am sorry they have had to experience that. I encourage trade union leaders to support their efforts and those of this industry to sort things out for passengers. It is a matter of great disappointment to me that the RMT has again today gone on strike on Northern at a time when the whole industry needs to work together to get the timetable back into shape.

The union makes spurious claims about safety, but trains have operated like this in the UK for more than 30 years. The London underground uses this system, as do trains around the network, and no one at Northern is losing their job or any pay. These changes will modernise the railway in the north and deliver better services for passengers who were signed up to by all the members of the partnership managing that franchise in the north. It is worth adding that on the Southern network, ASLEF, the train drivers union, reached a perfectly sensible agreement that should point the way forward. It is particularly disappointing, therefore, to see the Opposition acting effectively as a mouthpiece for a trade union that regards a Labour party led by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as too right wing to affiliate to. I urge him and his colleagues to urge his union supporters to back down from this dispute, stop calling strikes at a time of disruption on Northern and work together to sort out these problems.

I am clear that passengers on these lines have been severely affected by these issues and need to receive additional compensation. My Department is working closely with the TfN board, Network Rail, train operators and stakeholders to introduce the right compensation scheme as soon as possible. It will be funded by the industry. The Rail Minister has already recommended to the board that passengers who buy weekly, monthly or annual tickets on affected Northern and TPE routes will be eligible to claim up to four weeks’ compensation. As part of the scheme, the industry will provide financial support to TfN to deal with other costs that have arisen from the disruption, including on the Lakes line. There will also be a marketing campaign to encourage people to travel by train in the affected areas. I expect the TfN board to confirm the final details of the compensation scheme come its next meeting on 28 June and payments to begin in early July. I will confirm the full details of the compensation package for Thameslink and Great Northern customers on the affected routes at the same time. This will follow approximately the same approach as that on the Southern network. Because of the numbers of people involved, it will take a little longer to begin compensation payments, but I have told GTR that these need to begin before the end of July. Finally, we are considering options to further support the northern economy, and we expect Northern to fund a marketing campaign encouraging travel to affected areas by train when it resumes full operations, particularly on the Lakes line.

Political point scoring does not help passengers. We have seen that today. We need to work to deliver the best outcome for passengers and to improve services urgently. That is what I am focused on, what my Department is focused on and what the Government are focused on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, I need to tell colleagues that this is a well-subscribed debate, and we have another well-subscribed debate this afternoon, so after the SNP spokesperson, I will be imposing a six-minute time limit.

2.26 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Obviously, I echo the sentiments expressed by the two Front-Bench spokespersons about the accident yesterday and the workers who helped to keep people safe.

Another week, and here we are having another transport debate or statement. I am a little unsure of the Labour party’s tactics in trying to shift the Transport Secretary from his position, because it seems to me that the longer he stays in post, the more incompetent he shows the UK Government to be—and they, unlike the franchises, have real competition. He finished by saying there was a lot of political point scoring and that we should all work together, but it would be best if he took on board some of the criticisms. Any criticisms made—or even valid observations—are dismissed out of hand as political point scoring, when they are not, especially given that the franchise system is on its knees.

We have seen time and again that the Secretary of State is blinkered and ideological. He is a hardcore Brexiteer with the mantra, “Everything will be just fine. We just need to get on with it”, as illustrated by his proclamation that there will be no border checks post-Brexit and that lorries, just like on the US-Canada border, will not need to be stopped and checked. I have pointed out several times that that is wrong, but I have never had an admission of wrongdoing from the Secretary of State, and that is part of the problem.

The Secretary of State’s ideological zeal is at its most visible when it comes to the railways—private sector equals good, nationalisation or public ownership equals bad and inefficient—yet, under the current set-up, state-owned railway companies from all over the world run franchises in the UK. The UK franchise system, based on the premise that public ownership is bad, is subsidising railways across the world. Chiltern Railways, CrossCountry, Northern, and Wales and Borders are run by Arriva, which is owned by Deutsche Bahn. Essex Thameside is run by Trenitalia UK, which is owned by the Italian state railway. Greater Anglia and ScotRail are run by Abellio, which is owned by NedRailways, and Abellio is also involved with the West Midlands franchise, along with the East Japan Railway Company. Southeastern, Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern are run by Govia, which includes Keolis, which is owned by the French state rail operator, SNCF. Keolis is also involved in TransPennine Express and will be part of the re-let Welsh franchise later this year.

Italian, French, German, Dutch, Hong Kong and Japanese state rail companies are running franchises in the UK. When I weigh this up, I start to wonder

[Chris Grayling]
whether the UK franchising system should be classed as foreign aid—because that is what it seems like. Money is flowing out of the UK to these other countries. It illustrates perfectly the pig-headed attitude of the Secretary of State and Tory Back Benchers.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that many British firms operate railways in other countries? For example, National Express has just won a contract to run some railways in Germany.

Alan Brown: That misses the point. The German state railway company can bid for its own work in Germany. The whole point is that the UK Government refuse point blank to allow UK companies to bid for the franchises.

As I have said time and again, when it comes to the merits of privatisation and franchising, the Transport Secretary wrongly connects cause and effect. He has always played up the increase in investment in the railways since privatisation, along with the subsequent increase in passenger numbers, as if all that had happened magically just because of the sell-off and break-up of British Rail.

We know that British Rail had been struggling and had poor rolling stock, and that much of it was outdated, but that was because of the constraints imposed on British Rail by the UK Government, who did not allow any borrowing or investment. Once the Major Government had sold it off, the franchising allowed private borrowing to be levered in—borrowing that could be recovered only through fares or a Government subsidy. The fact that the current Secretary still does not acknowledge that shows a lack of understanding or an ideological blind spot. The fact is that the original sell-off was the private finance initiative on tracks, and that remains the case to this day.

Another myth, which we have already heard today, is that somehow the taxpayer pays no money to the franchises. According to the recent library briefing on rail franchises, all but two received Government subsidies in 2016-17, amounting to £2.330 million in that year alone.

A further indication of the failure of the franchise system to which the Secretary of State still adheres is the fact that by 2020, 12 of 16 franchise allocations will be direct awards. Where are the innovation and competition when three quarters of the franchises are direct awards to the companies themselves?

The Secretary of State’s blinkered attitude also permeates the failed East Coast franchise. He more or less shrugs his shoulders and says “Stuff happens: some franchises fail.” The reality is that private investors and companies either make money or they walk away. It has been argued there has not been a £2 billion bail-out of Virgin Trains East Coast, but the fact is that VTEC has walked away with a £2 billion IOU to the Government in its back pocket. It has not had to pay the money back, so if the Government do not want to call that a bail-out, it must be called a write-off. The Government have not tried to chase up the money, and it has not reached the stage of being a bad debt. The Government have simply let VTEC off straight away. I only wish that the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs would do the same when things go wrong for my constituents. Those bodies are relentless, so why should VTEC walk away owing £2 billion?

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree with me that franchisees that walk from a franchise should be banned from bidding for a significant period?

Alan Brown: Yes, I do. The Secretary of State says that there was a parent company guarantee of £165 million for VTEC, which is a lot of money, but if the parent company is picking up other money in franchises, including the direct award of the west coast main line, it is not actually losing that money. It should be penalised properly, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it should not be able to bid for other franchises. Its ability to bid for the east coast main line partnership has still not been ruled out.

The Secretary of State also justifies the predicament of the parent company by saying that it “got its sums wrong.” I remind him again that it is his Department that got its sums wrong when it carried out its due diligence and assessment. The Government are lucky that one of the other franchise bidders is not seeking redress from them, because they clearly got it wrong, and got the whole process wrong.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. Gentleman bear in mind that private rail operators in Britain are paying money into the Exchequer, whereas in France, 20% of the running costs come from the Government? When it comes to sums, which other areas of public spending would he have cut in order to pay for the things that he is talking about?

Alan Brown: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman listened to the point that I made about the subsidy that is paid to the rail franchise companies. It is a circular process, which makes it more complicated and more expensive, because of the number of cost consultants involved, taking money from one direction and paying money in another direction, and then blaming Network Rail. All that money can then circulate, and there are still net subsidies for those companies, although they pay track rental fees.

As I have said before, Richard Branson came out fighting. He blamed Network Rail for the overruns, but we have heard that Network Rail was not really at fault. The Secretary of State should be more robust in attacking VTEC. Letting it walk away owing that money undermines his position.

In previous incarnations, the east coast main line service has proved that public ownership can work. When it was last in public ownership, it paid the track rental fees and made a nominal profit, which went straight to the taxpayer. That model can work, and it should be used again in future. The Secretary of State ought to consider that.

Also on this Transport Secretary’s watch has been the Southern rail shambles. He did not do enough to step in. When I highlighted some of Southern’s failings on another occasion, he intervened and said that he was not the Transport Secretary who had been responsible for the allocation of the franchise. That completely missed the point: he was simply saying, “It’s not my fault, guv.”
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: I will, briefly, but I am pressed for time.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the situation on Southern and GTR was so long-running that the Secretary of State should step in now, and that there should be not a review but an immediate revocation of the franchise, as happened with Connect Southeastern under Labour?

Alan Brown: I agree that the failed franchise should be addressed and immediate action taken. The Secretary of State has been too slow, and the ongoing review will take too long and kick everything into the long grass.

When Abellio took over the ScotRail franchise, there were teething problems, which made national news. Opposition politicians in Scotland were not slow in calling for the head of Humza Yousaf, the Transport Minister. However, he stepped in and agreed a detailed action plan with the Abellio-ScotRail franchise, which really turned things around. It was direct intervention that made the difference.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): More than 50% of the delays in Scotland are down to Network Rail, which the Secretary of State stubbornly refuses to devolve to Scotland. Does my hon. Friend agree that if he did that, it could make a big difference to rail travel in Scotland immediately?

Alan Brown: It could make a big difference to rail travel in Scotland, and it could also make a Treasury saving. The fact that the Secretary of State continues to refuse to do that defies logic.

We have also seen the railcard fiasco. The railcard has been put on hold because, apparently, no one wants to pay for it. Who would have thought that railcards are for going on holiday? The Secretary of State, when they were introduced, said: “The industry will pay for it”.

Given the delays were the fault of Network Rail, will the Secretary of State do what the Scottish Tory leader thinks is correct, and what we think he should do?

2.38 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): We have been invited by the Opposition to debate a general motion of no confidence in my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary. I have full confidence in my right hon. Friend. He inherited a difficult task from the last Labour Government and the coalition Government. I think that he fully understands the magnitude of that task and that he is coming up with a number of creative proposals to try to improve the position.

Andy McDonald: It is a disaster.

John Redwood: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that, for 13 years, Labour did not invest in our roads and railways to give us the capacity that we need. I fully accept that during its five years in government, the coalition was unable to invest on the necessary scale because of the financial disaster that it inherited from the outgoing Labour Government. We have had almost 20 years of totally inadequate investment in road and rail capacity. We now have a growing economy. Many more people have jobs and need to get to work, many more children need to get to school, and many more people want to go to the shops or need to go to hospital, so we are simply running out of road and rail capacity.

My right hon. Friend is trying to use every method he can legally lay his hands on to address that chronic lack of capacity.

In my constituency, another 12,000 new homes are being built quite rapidly, and the pressures on our infrastructure are enormous. I witnessed some of the difficulties due to rail delays on Thursday and Friday when I was trying to use services in and out of Reading and there were disruptions. My right hon. Friend has asked the extremely well-paid leaders of the railway industry to get a grip on their services and ensure they deliver on the infrastructure available. But he has gone further than that: he has said to the railways that they will need much more capacity in the years ahead to deal with fast-growing places such as Wokingham, and he has therefore said that digital technology will make a big difference. I fully support his strong initiative. The very lengthy and expensive process of creating entirely new railway lines is not a feasible solution across the country, so the way to get more capacity out of our existing railways is to use digital signalling, meaning that instead of being able to run only 20 trains an hour on perfectly good track, we can run 25 or more trains an hour, giving a big boost to capacity for a relatively modest investment.

My right hon. Friend is also right to recognise that he will need private sector as well as public sector investment. I noted that the Scottish National party spokesperson, who clearly did not know the figures, was unable to respond to an intervention about how, in his party’s fully nationalised world, it would replace the large sums of capital and the considerable sums of revenue that the private sector tips into the railways as the partnership model develops.

The Labour party is with the SNP on this. It always denies that any fault rests with the nationalised section of the railway, yet in the latest set of problems, particularly in Northern rail, big errors were made by the heavily subsidised nationalised part of the industry. I am very glad that my right hon. Friend says there will be new leadership there, because new leadership is desperately needed to supervise the expenditure of the very substantial sums that this Parliament has voted for that industry and to make sure they are well spent.

Another reason why I have confidence in my right hon. Friend is because he recognises that we need road as well as rail capacity, because the overwhelming majority
of all our constituents’ journeys are still undertaken by car or van or bus, and they require road capacity. The most welcome thing he has done so far is to say we need not just to expand the strategic national highways network, which of course we do, but a strategic local network so that we can beef up the A roads. That would mean that we could have more through traffic, meaning that vehicles would be taken away from residential areas and town centres, where we do not want conflict between traffic, pedestrians and cyclists. It would also free some of the blocks on the existing highways and provide better journeys.

I hope that as my right hon. Friend goes about selecting that strategic local route network with councils, he will look favourably on the bids from West Berkshire and Wokingham in my area. We have put a lot of thought into them and wish to make progress, but we will need substantial investment to create better access routes to the main cities and centres of employment, because the existing network is already well over capacity in terms of congestion.

I hope my right hon. Friend will also consider the interface between the rail and road networks. One of the big issues in my area is that we cannot get over the railway line. We rely on level crossings, but their gates are down for a lot of the time at busy periods for the railways, meaning that we get massive onward congestion in the road system. We therefore need money for bridges.

I also hope that work on the strategic local road network will involve looking at junctions. A modest way in which we could get much more capacity out of the current road network would be to improve junctions. It is often a good idea to have roundabouts rather than traffic lights, and another good idea is the better phasing of traffic lights. Traffic lights can be fitted with sensors so that if there is no traffic on an approach road, that road does not get a green phase. Roads should get a green phase only when somebody needs that.

There are many things that can be done. I have every confidence that my right hon. Friend wants to do them, so will he please get on with that, and will Parliament allow him to do so?

2.44 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support the motion because somebody has to take responsibility for what is happening to my constituents who use the trains on a daily basis. This Government have history in terms of how they have treated my constituents. They interfered with the Thameslink project when they first got their hands on the Department for Transport, taking the Blackfriars Thameslink trains away from south-east London. They not only took the trains away, but wasted £50 million of public money in order to do so. As a consequence, they shortened the trains going through the centre of London to allow them to go on to the Wimbledon line. I am sure that had nothing to do with the fact that the then trains Minister represented Wimbledon—I make no accusation in that regard whatsoever—but that reduced the capacity of the Thameslink trains going through central London. I will be contacting the National Audit Office to ask whether we are getting value for money out of the Thameslink train service, certainly in south-east London, as a consequence of such decisions on that scheme.

Since 2009, my constituents have been suffering a great deal of disruption as a consequence of the excellent refurbishment of London Bridge. I pay tribute to everyone involved in that refurbishment, but my constituents have had to accept that their services have been cut to certain destinations in central London. There have been no trains to Cannon Street for a number of years, and no trains to Charing Cross as the work switched over on to another set of lines. My constituents were told all the time that, at the end of the process, the network would go back to the original train timetable, meaning that they would have Charing Cross, Cannon Street and Victoria as a choice of destinations.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Does he agree that that is why many commuters, particularly in London and the south, have been so angry? They have had years and years of disruption due to not only repair works, but the disaster of the franchise, and now the railway collapses under their feet. The Government have a responsibility to take action.

Clive Efford: Absolutely; someone has to take responsibility. When my constituents were told they had to suffer this disruption, they accepted that, because a major refurbishment was taking place, but they were told that things would improve when the services were restored. They are now told that they will have fewer central London destinations to choose from because, apparently, it is very difficult to cross trains over on the western side of Lewisham station. We are told that because that creates too much congestion, we have to have a service cut. That is despite the fact that we have just spent £9 billion on this project, with £1 billion of that for the refurbishment of London Bridge. My constituents are incredibly angry.

However, as the project is coming to an end and the services are starting to be reintroduced—except those that are going to be cut, of course, under the new franchise, which is a direct decision of the Secretary of State—the infrastructure around the new project is starting to crumble. On 5 April, there was a broken rail and people were stuck on a train for five hours. The merest incident of severe weather leaves people stranded on trains for hours—on freezing cold trains with no electricity.

The franchise is run right at the cusp, meaning that whenever something goes wrong, it turns into a major incident involving a major delay. There are not enough drivers, there is not enough maintenance, and the infrastructure is crumbling around the new project at London Bridge. However, the Secretary of State allows Govia, which currently runs the franchise, to rebid. He now says that the person at the top of Govia has resigned—Charles Horton has gone—but that the company is apparently good enough to continue running the service. That is unacceptable and someone must accept responsibility.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Since the start of this crisis everybody has tried to pin the blame on someone else. The Secretary of State blamed Northern for not being prepared, and Northern blamed the Department for Transport. Yesterday, in evidence to the Transport Committee, David Brown admitted that Northern was not aware of the extent of the imminent
Crisis until two days before the timetable went live. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State must finally take responsibility for this crisis, ensure that passengers get the compensation they deserve, and allow somebody who can handle the demands of his job to take over?

Clive Efford: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State has to take responsibility. That is why I fully support the motion.

The Secretary of State really exposed himself by putting his particularly dogmatic approach to the franchise system ahead of the interests of passengers in a letter that he wrote on 24 April 2013 to the present Foreign Secretary when he was Mayor of London. His letter actually predicted that the Tories were toast and that Labour was going to win the mayoral election. He stated that he did not want to see the London overground services in “the clutches” of a Labour mayor. That had nothing to do with what was in the interests of my constituents or anyone else who used the trains. It was pure political dogma. He was saying, “I don’t like the Labour party, so no matter how much it could improve the service for people who use the trains, we’re not going to let Labour take over the rail service.” So much for an open bidding process to run the best possible service!

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a pattern of behaviour here? Before the 2015 election, when the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) was Lord Chancellor, Labour wrote to say that there should be no more privatisation contracts in the probation service. The right hon. Gentleman ignored that, because he did not want to accept that Labour was right about the disaster that the probation service now is.

Clive Efford: That is absolutely right. This is the first time that the right hon. Gentleman has got caught when everything has come home to roost while he is still in position. Usually he moves on and someone else has to sort out his problems—for example, by allowing prisoners to have books.

My constituents deserve a better service. Their services are being cut and they will have a reduced choice under the new franchise. They do not want Govia to be allowed to continue running the franchise, yet it has still been allowed to bid. They want longer trains, and I have lobbied many times in here to get extra carriages for the franchise but they have disappeared into the system. We still have eight-car trains turning up at peak times and there is not enough space for people to have a comfortable journey into town.

South-east London has been appallingly served by this Secretary of State. There has been a constant litany of letting us down, and the buck has to stop somewhere. He has never stood up to the franchise operators—the train operators—to ensure that we get value for money and the services we are entitled to in south-east London. For him, everything is fine as long as it is privatised. He has never made any attempt to take on the private enterprise that is profiteering at the expense of the people who rely on the trains. In south-east London we do not have direct access to the London underground, so anyone who wants to commute into London has to use the bus or the rail service. The rail service, as it has been run by this Government, has been appalling and it is getting worse. The buck stops with the Secretary of State, so I fully support the motion.

2.52 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in the debate this afternoon and to place on record my support for the Secretary of State, who I believe is doing a very good job in delivering what this country needs in incredibly challenging circumstances. That is particularly true from the point of view of the far south-west, where we are seeing record levels of investment in our transport infrastructure. After 13 years in which Cornwall basically got nothing whatsoever from the Labour Government, we are seeing hundreds of millions of pounds being invested in our transport system.

On our roads, we have at last seen the dualling of the A30 across Bodmin moor. I am sure that hon. Members will be delighted to experience that when they come to Cornwall on their holidays, but we have been waiting 20 years for it to be delivered. It has now been delivered under this Government, after Labour did nothing to help us. We are now putting our focus on the next bit of the A30, which will involve dualling the stretch between Chiverton and Carland Cross. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) is working closely with the Secretary of State to ensure that we deliver that as soon as possible.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): May I suggest an additional area of progress that is needed for disabled wheelchair users? The hon. Gentleman might know that many operators require them to give 24 hours’ notice if they want to travel on a train. That is unacceptable. Does he agree that the Secretary of State should work with the train operators to ensure a more can-do attitude to assist those people who might need to catch a train at the last minute?

Steve Double: I am not aware of the issue that the hon. Lady raises. It has never been raised with me by constituents—[Interruption.] I am happy to take it on board and look at it, but that is a new one; it has never been raised by any of my constituents.

In my constituency, the Secretary of State has committed to fund a new link road from St Austell to the A30. That is something that the people of St Austell have been waiting nearly 30 years to see delivered. Under Labour, we had no progress whatsoever on that, but it is now happening under this Secretary of State. We are also seeing progress on the A303, which is being dualled through Wiltshire. That is absolutely vital to the tourism industry in the south-west, and we are seeing real progress on it.

On our railways, we are about to see brand-new rolling stock being rolled out on the Great Western Railway into Cornwall to replace the 40-year-old trains that we currently have to put up with. The new state-of-the-art rolling stock will have far more seats for passengers and a much better driver experience. We have also seen the upgrading of our signalling on the railways through Cornwall. That will increase capacity and the frequency
of the trains. Again, that is the result of more investment that this Government are delivering for transport into Cornwall.

We are also seeing progress on resilience in south Devon. I am sure that all Members will remember the damage that was caused by the weather at Dawlish and Teignmouth in 2014. That situation arose because of the lack of investment over many years, but this Government are investing and building resilience into the rail network throughout Devon. That is something that we desperately need. On aviation, this Government are supporting regional aviation and they have supported my local airport at Newquay with a link to London. They are also backing our bid for further connections into Heathrow in the near future.

So, from a local point of view in Cornwall, this Secretary of State is doing a very good job. He is delivering for the people of Cornwall like no one has ever done before. We need to understand that the current challenges that have provoked this debate have come about as a result of a combination of many complex issues, and to play political games and use this as an opportunity for political opportunism is not what we need right now. We need to resolve the issues, and changing the Secretary of State at this point is not going to help. We need someone in position who can bring us the answers that we need in order to address those issues, so I am happy to say that I will not be supporting the motion today and that the Secretary of State has my full confidence.

2.57 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): One thing that the Secretary of State has managed to do is to unite those on both sides of the Pennines—which is actually quite remarkable—in our view that it is time for him to go. Lancashire and Yorkshire do not normally get on that well, but we are united in this regard. Ministers will know that in recent weeks the great newspapers of the north have been united on their front pages in calling for the Secretary of State to go. ITV has also joined in recently. The Yorkshire Post and my own newspaper in Hull, the Hull Daily Mail, have made it very clear that we cannot carry on like this and that enough is enough.

We have heard a lot in recent weeks about the timetabling fiasco, particularly in relation to Northern, but as a Member of Parliament for the north, I want to look more broadly at what this Government have said about their commitment to the northern powerhouse and to the connectivity between the eastern and western parts of the north to bring together the great cities of the north. We know that, despite all the words we hear every time a Minister gets up to talk about this, the reality on the ground is very different. We know that the investment going into the north pales in comparison with what is going into London, which gets five times as much. We know that Transport for the North, which Ministers always talk about, is only a consultative body. It does not have statutory powers. It cannot do what Transport for London is able to do to bring in investment.

In recent years, we have also had the fiasco of the electrification of the lines across the Pennines. Hull was actually missed off the first plan that was put forward, and we had to put together our own plan, using private sector funds, in order to be part of the electrification scheme. That proposal went into the Department for Transport and then, several years later under the current Secretary of State, it was refused.

There is confusion about future electrification across the Pennines. We thought the line was going to be electrified, but the Secretary of State seems to have just discovered bimodal trains, which have been around for quite a long time. In addition, when the House was considering commercial space travel recently, I noted that it seems there will be commercial space flights before the line to Hull gets electrified.

Timetabling has been discussed a lot today, and one of the big issues is that for some strange reason Hull was given slower trains across the Pennines when the new timetable was agreed. The whole idea was that the changes would speed things up and connect cities, but Hull finds itself with trains that take 15 to 20 minutes longer to get across to Manchester. When the new rolling stock comes in as part of the TPE franchise, Hull will get new trains but refurbished trains. However, Scarborough—I am not casting aspersions on the fact that a previous Rail Minister represents Scarborough—now has new and faster trains across the Pennines. How come the great cities of the north are being treated like that? I remind the Rail Minister of the three things that we would have expected the Secretary of State to support in Hull: a half-hourly express service across the Pennines as part of the northern powerhouse; a direct train to Liverpool; and a direct train to Manchester airport. I found out last week that Llandudno has a direct train to Manchester airport—good on Llandudno—so why does Hull not have one?

We have heard the dogma as to why franchising is continuing, but I want to discuss open-access trains. We had to fight hard to get Hull Trains, an open-access operator, to provide a direct service to London, but it is in meltdown, and I have heard nothing from the Department for Transport or the Secretary of State about that. Our rolling stock constantly breaks down, we do not have enough spare capacity, and drivers are trained only on the class 185s, which are unfit for the route down to London. FirstGroup, the parent company, does not seem to be doing anything about the fact that Hull Trains’ reputation, which was good in the city, is taking a nosedive, with people feeling that it is no longer a reliable service, but there has been nothing from the Department on that.

Looking at the franchise that the Department and the Secretary of State are involved with, TransPennine runs the station in Hull and has spent £1.4 million on it, but we are still among the top 10 worst stations in country. It has managed to build some small, smelly toilets to replace the old ones and some new retail units, which have remained empty for weeks. Every morning, I walk through Canary Wharf to get to Westminster, and I see Canary Wharf station, which cost £500 million and has a roof garden. Of course, private money has gone into that project, but we cannot even get a toilet attendant at Hull station. I want to highlight to the Secretary of State and the Minister the stark difference between the north and the south. This is like a “Carry On” film; it is a farce. The Secretary of State must take responsibility. The buck stops with him and he should go.
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): One thing that is often lost in debates like this is the practical impact of such issues on passengers. I urge the Minister, the Secretary of State and all Members to remember that, yes, this is about getting investment, improving stations and timetables and increasing capacity, but fundamentally the whole point of the system is to make life better for our constituents, particularly those who rely on trains to get to work. Many Members have talked about the difficulties of recent weeks, and the House does not need to hear any more from me about my disappointment in relation to my constituency or those of other right hon. and hon. Members.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): My hon. Friend, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and I have been working hard with Ministers and with Gobia—we are in touch daily—because tens of thousands of our constituents have been massively affected every single day. We are trying to fix things so that our constituents can get to work. Although there are issues with the timetable in our area, things will be dramatically better when it works. The number of seats will be doubled, there will be 50% more trains from my constituency, and a whole variety of new destinations will be provided. When the new timetable is in place, there will be positives, but there are issues now, and they are what we are working daily to resolve.

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend. One point worth making—one that backs up his intervention—is that a real frustration as a Member of Parliament is knowing the intended improvements over the medium term, but constituents quite rightly not believing that the improvements will happen when the implementation does not work as hoped. It is therefore incumbent on the Secretary of State to remember that we move towards a system with service levels and a single ticket for a train that is cancelled or delayed, but that we move towards a system with service levels and a whole variety of new destinations will be provided. When the new timetable is in place, there will be positives, but there are issues now, and they are what we are working daily to resolve.

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend. One point worth making—one that backs up his intervention—is that a real frustration as a Member of Parliament is knowing the intended improvements over the medium term, but constituents quite rightly not believing that the improvements will happen when the implementation does not work as hoped. It is therefore incumbent on the Secretary of State to remember that we move towards a system with service levels and a single ticket for a train that is cancelled or delayed, but that we move towards a system with service levels and a whole variety of new destinations will be provided. When the new timetable is in place, there will be positives, but there are issues now, and they are what we are working daily to resolve.

I want to draw the attention of the House and the Minister to a private Member’s Bill that I will shortly introduce relating to enhanced compensation for passengers. I recognise that the Secretary of State has set out a compensation scheme specifically for the disturbances over past weeks, but the compensation in the Bill will be governed by the Government’s new rail ombudsman on an ongoing basis, providing automatic compensation for all passengers throughout the country. In addition, it will provide enhanced, more generous compensation for passengers throughout the country. Critically, it will ensure not just that passengers get a percentage of a single ticket for a train that is cancelled or delayed, but that we move towards a system with service levels and a contract between the operator and the passenger. Then, if that service level is not maintained, the passenger will receive compensation. I would like the Minister and the Secretary of State to consider that direction.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for flagging up his Bill and welcome what he describes. Will he confirm whether the compensation for the current timetable problems should be based on the new timetable that was expected to be introduced, not the reduced timetable, and therefore be much larger? Does he agree that there is a strong case for making train companies and Network Rail liable for consequential losses associated with train delays, not just the ticket cost?

Bim Afolami: On the right hon. Gentleman’s first point, that would depend on when the Bill could make progress and whether it would take effect in time. It is difficult to understand how the proposed compensation regime would interact with the special compensation regime relating to the implementation of the new timetable. However, on the right hon. Gentleman’s broader point about consequential loss, he will appreciate that that is hard to prove. I remember from my days as a corporate lawyer that consequential loss in contracts is one of the toughest things to prove. I am not saying that he is incorrect, but it would merit further consultation and I am happy to sit down and discuss the matter with him. If we can come to an agreement, hopefully the Liberal Democrats will support my private Member’s Bill.

A point that is often made to me is that many commuters do not have a good enough choice. On some lines, the operator is the only game in town, and where that happens, it is incumbent on the operator to do a significantly better job at getting on top of problems when they arise. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) made the point that the Secretary of State may need additional powers at times of crisis to direct what needs to happen at certain stations, and the House should consider that. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has said to me, both privately and in this House, that he is committed to improving the situation at Hitchin and Harpenden stations once we have got past the current difficulties—[Interruption.] I can see the Rail Minister nodding in approval, which is always good. My constituents—I was nervous about this before I came to speak this afternoon—are not particularly interested in rhetoric; they are interested in making sure these changes are introduced in the right way to provide real practical improvements to them and their lives. That is what I, as the local Member of Parliament and with the Government, will hopefully be providing.

3.10 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for moving the motion.

Although the Secretary of State is no longer in his place, I thank him for meeting me last week to talk in detail about the reasons for the timetabling meltdown in Batley and Spen. I am grateful for his reassurance that, over time, things will settle down.

Last Friday morning, I spent time outside Batley railway station to speak to commuters about their experience of commuting and to hear how things are, we hope, getting better. Sadly, that was not the feedback I got. I was startled by how chaotic and unreliable the service between Leeds, Huddersfield and Manchester still is.

I heard from Mandy that her regular journey from Batley to Leeds, during the timetable chaos and beyond, is “the worst commuting experience I have ever had.” She went on to say that “to say there is only standing room is an understatement. Passengers are crammed into a limited number of carriages like sardines.”
I spoke to Dean, who uses trains every day. He said that travelling by train often adds two hours to his day due to delays, with “extra hours away from home on top of a long working day.” He went on to say that “the situation is threatening the livelihoods of many.” Dean wanted me to ask directly whether, if he were to lose his job due to mismanagement of the railways, the Minister and the Government would pay his mortgage and support his family.

I also met Rachael, who was forced to spend her journey standing in the toilet with six other commuters, as there was no space anywhere else. She told me that, as late as this week, her regular service left people on the platform, without opening its doors, as it was too full by the time it arrived in Batley. Seventy people were left waiting over 70 minutes for the next train.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as our constituents are paying some of the highest prices in Europe for train tickets, the minimum they should expect is for trains to run on time and to be modern and comfortable and for them not to be packed like sardines? If the train companies are unable to do that, they should have their franchises taken off them and be brought back under public ownership.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I could not agree more. Given the cost of tickets, people should not have to stand on a daily basis. Beyond Batley to Leeds, the timetable is erratic and in chaos, and it still has not settled down.

I spoke to Alison, who told me how concerned she is about health and safety. Crowds of passengers are jostling and pushing to get on already overcrowded and delayed trains.

This is just a snapshot of what is happening twice a day, every day, at most stations across the north. My constituents still see no positive change in their commute, even after reassurances from the Secretary of State. What is the Minister doing to ensure that the train companies are unable to do that, they should have their franchises taken off them and be brought back under public ownership.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one way forward might be to follow the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) to increase the availability of compensation to passengers who have been badly treated?

Huw Merriman: I certainly do, not least because my Automatic Travel Compensation Bill is awaiting Second Reading. The Bill is all about automatic and automated compensation, on which I have met the Rail Minister. It is fair to say that I have not quite persuaded him of the Bill’s merits, but it would place a duty on train companies that currently receive money from Network Rail where there have been delays. Only a third of passengers claim for such delays, so I contend that extra money is left with the train operators. My Bill would require the train operators to invest that money in technology so that my right hon. Friend and I could both tap in and tap out, which would tell us whether we had been delayed by more than 15 or 30 minutes, and if we had been, we would automatically be credited with the compensation we were due. That would be a good step forward, because passengers find it too complex and difficult to claim. Therefore, they do not claim, and as a result, they feel raw about the service. The Government could do more for passengers by making it easier to claim compensation, and perhaps passengers would then give us more support on some of the other changes we are trying to put through. That is a rather lengthy response, but I agree with my right hon. Friend. I hope that my Bill’s Second Reading will yield some success. If my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) has a similar proposal, perhaps we could merge the two.

On the rail timetabling issue, my constituency has had an additional service—a fourth service each hour—in an incredibly congested network. I take my hat off to
GTR and my rail user group, which came up with an ingenious solution to deliver the extra service without any new rolling stock. The timetable just changed when trains go back and forth between Ashford and Brighton, which has worked incredibly well.

I understand that we, as MPs, are less likely to hear about things that have worked well. Quite rightly, we hear about the challenges where things have not worked. I use the trains every day to come into work, and today I had the opportunity to talk to one of the conductor's on my line, a guy called Giles. I was supposed to be reading through the Transport Committee's draft report on rail infrastructure, but I put it down to have a chat with the conductor. We chatted for the entire journey about some of the issues he has, and his points were well raised. He is aware that, as technology advances, the workforce will need to embrace it too. His concern on the role of the guard, conductor or on-board supervisor, as these people tend to be called, is that there will be fewer of them. That is a valid concern, because most passengers on trains want to see a second member of staff on board.

My point is that, where the system is inflexible, if the second member of staff is unable to join the train for any reason, that train cannot roll. I was a Southern season ticket holder for 10 years and we had one train every hour, so when that train could not go because the conductor was not able to board, there was a two-hour delay, which was no good for anybody. It certainly was no good for tackling congestion or for those who had mobility issues in the station. So I like the flexibility that has now been introduced in Southern whereby in all but exceptional circumstances there must be a second member of staff on board. Where such circumstances do apply—and this cannot be where Southern has not recruited enough conductors—the train can still roll, so passengers can get home. Of course that type of situation has existed on Southeastern for years and it also exists on 30% of the rail network, where the driver operates the doors.

There is another point to make about incidents that have taken place, including one in Liverpool. Where the driver and the conductor are performing different roles, tragedies can occur. A young lady died on the tracks and the coroner's inquest made the point that if the control mechanism is taken by one person, we are less likely to see that eventuality occur. I often hear safety used as the reason why this is an issue. I was asked by the rail unions to see whether a safety report could be created. We got the rail regulator to deliver that, but it was then ignored, so I feel that all sides need to work a little more together.

3.21 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It will not be a surprise to the Secretary of State or the Minister to see me standing up to speak in this important debate, as my office has been in daily contact with theirs over the past few weeks. I can tell them that things are no better in Bedford. Until 20 May, passengers in Bedford had two choices: they could travel on Thameslink trains, which were slow but made more stops, or they could travel in and out of London on a fast East Midlands Trains service. The Department stopped those fast trains last month. We were told in December that there was no choice but to do that. We were promised that it was only for two years and that we would have two fast Thameslink trains an hour and thousands more seats instead, but that was not true. What we have seen since 20 May has been absolute chaos. People are paying to stay in hotels all week, and some are driving into the city. People have run out of childcare options and their bosses have lost patience. These people are tired, angry and desperate. They have been crammed like sardines into the few trains that do run, and family life has been completely disrupted.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend's constituents' experience absolutely reflects those of my constituents. The two train stations in my constituency are the last two before the main Leeds city station. By the time the two-carrriage trains come, they are full and my constituents cannot get on them. When they do, we have seen cases where people have fainted or been unable to breathe. Does he agree that we need to do something now, as the lack of investment and action is dreadful?

Mohammad Yasin: I agree with what my hon. Friend says, because I am a commuter and I see the trouble at Bedford station every day. Almost every hour, a train is either delayed or cancelled. This Government need to take control and do something about this urgently.

Two weeks ago, in this Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State to reinstate EMT peak rail services. His response was that that would be the logical solution to the problem, yet two weeks later those trains are still speeding through Bedford half empty and not stopping. On Friday, he finally wrote to me to tell me that he cannot make this happen after all, as, apparently, it will make some trains 13 minutes later further up the track. Tell that to my constituents who have to wait an hour or more for a train and do not see their children before they go to bed. Tell them that a 13-minute delay on a journey to Sheffield is a good enough reason for these services not to be reinstated. EMT says that these services are already overcrowded. In his letter on Friday, the managing director of EMT said that “there are few, if any seats available”.

Yet EMT’s own guide to seat availability says that all but one of the peak-time trains travelling between Wellingborough and St Pancras have seating available. Most are running at 75% capacity or less; we can all see the empty seats, but we just cannot get on those trains. I have no idea why there is such an absence of will to sort this problem, but this is a mess, and it is clear now that there was never any intention of bringing inter-city fast trains back after two years either, because if they cannot make it happen now, when Thameslink is not operating a full service, they are not going to be able to make it happen when it eventually is. All we have heard are excuses. The truth is the industry needs to work together to resolve this quickly. The Secretary of State should have a grip on this weeks ago—months ago, in fact. I warned him and the Minister many times that this timetable will not work for Bedford, but they completely ignored that and carried on regardless. He and his Department have spent a good proportion of the past few weeks putting together the invitation to tender for the new east midlands franchise. Is this farce not proof...
enough for him that rail franchising does not work? My constituents need solutions and they need them urgently. They need solutions before things get even worse. If the Secretary of State cannot fix this, he should resign and give the job to someone who can.

3.27 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to support the motion standing in the names of my Front-Bench colleagues. I also wish to thank members of the Transport Committee for their informed contributions to the debate, and I am delighted that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is a supporter of keeping the guards on the trains—well done on that. [Interruption.] Perhaps it is qualified support.

As a member of the Transport Committee and a regular rail user, I have been following the recent regression of the rail service, particularly in my region, with great concern. The catastrophic May timetable changes seem to have been completely avoidable. The Secretary of State ignored warnings and failed to delay or phase in the changes.

Yesterday, my Transport Committee colleagues and I spent three hours asking questions of and taking evidence from representatives from Northern, GTR and Network Rail. I was quite interested to hear the Secretary of State say in response to a comment made by the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), that he made the decision to proceed with the changes in July 2017, because my understanding from what the witnesses said yesterday is that concerns were expressed at a meeting involving stakeholders and Network Rail in January, some six months before the ultimate decision was made. There was ample opportunity for the Secretary of State and his advisers in the Department to intervene and identify some mitigating actions, which could have included either delaying the implementation or phasing it in.

Andy McDonald: Given that GTR is a concession and is paid a management fee, could my hon. Friend cast some light on whether the revenue due to the DfT was a factor in the delay in the implementation of the decision?

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend raises a good question. I asked the GTR witnesses yesterday whether revenue was a material factor, and their response was that all the revenue is collected directly. They intimated that there were no revenue implications, although I am rather sceptical that ultimately revenue may well have been a factor in the decision about whether to phase or to delay the implementation of the new timetable. Perhaps the Committee can pursue further whether that was the case.

We have heard from Opposition and Government Members about the impact of the terrible delays. In my area, at the worst times up to 43% of Northern trains have been cancelled or delayed each day. From 4 June, Northern cancelled 165 trains a day, including all services to the Lake district, as we have heard. Since 20 May, 11% of Northern trains have been delayed or cancelled each day.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that although this issue is concentrated in the north, the east and London, it is a national problem? Great Western has been through its own dramatic problems, with a huge number of cancellations, driver shortages and all the other problems that have been mentioned. It is a national problem.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that thoughtful intervention, and my hon. Friend makes a good point. However, although there are national issues with the training of drivers and ensuring that they have the appropriate skillset, industry stakeholders pointed out to the Department and, presumably, the Secretary of State that it would normally take 40 weeks to prepare, identify training needs and ensure that drivers were in place, but in this case only 16 weeks were allocated and, if my memory of yesterday’s evidence serves me right, it was not until around two days before implementation, when they were drawing up the driver rosters, that they discovered that they had the wrong skill mix and that the drivers were in the wrong places to operate the new timetable. So although my hon. Friend makes a good point, Ministers and the Secretary of State must ultimately bear responsibility for the decisions that were made.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): It is quite simple in the industry: although experienced, train drivers need training on new routes and on the use of different rolling stock. Without that training, they cannot go into service.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely; that is a key point. I am kind of long in the tooth now, but I remember the dreadful train accident at Ladbroke Grove, where 31 people were killed and 500 injured; a dear friend of mine was killed in the Southall train disaster, in which seven were killed and more than 140 were injured; and I remember another accident at Clapham Junction. What with the complexity of the new signalling systems at places like London Bridge, with large numbers of tracks, it is safety-critical that the drivers are fully aware of which signals actually apply to them. It is a mistake for the Secretary of State to imply that ASLEF, representing the train drivers, should somehow make a concession on the training to which its members are subjected. When I get on a train, I want to be absolutely certain that it is completely safe and that the drivers are familiar with the track and the signalling system. I also want to know that there is a guard on the train, so that if anything happens—if anyone is attacked or taken ill—or there is a disabled or blind person or a woman with children travelling, the guard will be able to assist. That is reasonable in such circumstances.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle about the GTR chief executive, Charles Horton, who seemed like a thoroughly decent man. He said that he was deeply sorry for the timetable disruption. I think it was unfair that he seems to be carrying the can, when I suspect the blame should be apportioned further up the food chain. The witnesses yesterday were well schooled in collective responsibility, but ultimately the buck must stop with the Secretary of State. It is not good enough just to keep saying sorry.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame Morris: I am sorry; I am running very short of time.
It is another failure on the Secretary of State’s watch. We have fundamental problems with integration, lack of planning and decision making. The franchising model is broken. It is time for a new approach and a new driver at the head of the Department for Transport.

3.35 pm

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The motion on the Order Paper is “That this House has no confidence in the Secretary of State” and we have already heard from the fourth and final Government Back Bencher who has come along to speak in support of the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State has not stayed in the Chamber to listen to the speeches today, but if I were giving advice to him or to Conservative Back Benchers, I would suggest that they go out and buy a plaque that says, “The buck stops here” and attach it to his desk, because that is what the debate is all about. It is about the public wanting to elect politicians to run a decent railway system. I congratulate my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State on standing up and confidently saying that he wants to be a Secretary of State who runs the railways and is held accountable.

The meltdown caused by the introduction of the new rail timetable in May is just the latest in a chain of crises on our railways. We have an over-complex and fractured rail system. It has too many operators and a complex web of contractors and sub-contractors. This patchwork of competing interests militates against effective planning and delivery of the railway, making Britain’s rail system one of the most expensive and now worst run in Europe. Since 2010, fares have risen three times faster than wages, and in January we had the highest fare increases for five years. That is not to mention the more than £5 billion of public money used to subsidise the private rail network every year.

It seems to me that incompetent rail companies have become too big to fail in the eyes of this Government. The rewards are privatised, but the risks are dumped on passengers and taxpayers, who always end up footing the bill. The public are tired of paying the price for a broken privatised and franchised model. Is that any surprise? What are they getting in return? Higher fares for a worse service; botched timetables and thousands of cancellations; and a policy of de-staffing the railways in the interests of profit, regardless of the consequences for staff and the travelling public.

One of the first campaigns I backed following my election in June last year, was the RMT’s campaign to keep the guard on the train, after Merseyrail announced that it was planning to axe all 207 guards from the service when the new fleet arrives in 2020. My constituents welcome the introduction of new and modern trains—long overdue and for which the unions campaigned—but they also value the safety and security of a guard on the train.

Private rail companies are making huge profits from the travelling public, and it is completely wrong that we are presented with false choices between embracing new technology and protecting secure jobs and public safety. It is nonsense. The campaign has enjoyed the overwhelming support of the public, despite strikes, and I am glad that Merseyrail has recognised that strength of feeling and that talks at ACAS are now taking place. Both the Scottish and Welsh Governments have agreed that there will be no extension of driver-only operation on services that they are responsible for, and I hope that Merseyrail will follow suit so that passengers in my constituency are afforded the same safety standards as are enjoyed elsewhere.

However, the RMT fears that since the Secretary of State was appointed he has been blocking any similar deals in an effort to “take on” the union. These fears were again confirmed when the Public Accounts Committee recently produced a report on franchising that concluded that the blame for the protracted Southern driver-only operation dispute lay squarely at the door of the Government for not engaging properly with the trade unions.

The franchising system fails to allow for industrial relations at all. Train operating companies have little interest beyond the terms of their franchise agreements, and changes are routinely forced through without any serious consultation. The introduction of the May 2018 timetable required changes on a huge scale. Change requires the co-operation, engagement and good will of the workforce, which has been undermined constantly by the rail companies and by the Government’s handling of the DOO dispute.

The rail industry lacks a clear chain of command and clear lines of accountability, so it is easy to blame others. Ultimately, though, the buck stops with the Transport Secretary. Not only has he failed on a managerial level; he has defended, at every turn, the systemic failure of rail privatisation. My advice to him is simple. First, take responsibility. Secondly, listen to the public, who by a vast majority support a return to public ownership and public control of our railways.

3.40 pm

**Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): When Parliament returned on 4 June after the recess, I challenged the Secretary of State, telling him that he was in great trouble over this situation, not least because it would run on for months and months. There has been little to cause me to reassess those comments in the past three or four weeks. For me and my constituents in Luton who travel by train regularly, it is clear that this chaos is not going anywhere quickly, but we are yet to establish who is responsible for the chaos not only when the changes were implemented, but as it is sorted out. I am afraid that the attitude of the Secretary of State has led us to today’s position, whereby we will shortly vote on whether we have confidence in him.

We are now close to the sixth week of chaos on GTR, with the admission that it is going to drag on for months. The Secretary of State said today that GTR will develop a temporary timetable in time for the summer holidays, but that is not good enough. It is a complete abdication of responsibility. GTR’s chief executive has resigned. Network Rail’s chief executive officer and chief financial officer have turned down their bonuses. But there has been no acceptance of responsibility from the one person we ask to sort things out when they go wrong.

Let me be clear about my view on the franchise and who is responsible. I am open-minded on rail. I believe that a transformation project as vast as the Thameslink...
programme, with £7 billion of taxpayer-invested money, should always have been operated and developed under the direct ownership and accountability of Government Ministers. That is why I said that it should not have been issued on a franchise or management contract back in 2014. It is equally clear that, given its record of failure, GTR cannot be in charge of the major changes that are coming in December 2018. GTR should not be responsible for this franchise when we get to December.

It is clear that franchising is broken. The series of statements, speeches and debates in the past year clearly demonstrate that there is very little good news about the franchising system on our railway, and that is because of one simple reason: there is no clear accountability. Let us be clear: the current system and the decisions that had already been taken to award this franchise could have worked with creative, intelligent leadership from the Secretary of State. That was absent. He lacks the intellectual curiosity to participate and, as I will explain, he had every opportunity to win us round.

I want to talk about two things: structures and the decisions that have been made. Let us look at the institutions that the Secretary of State has chucked together for Transport Rail’s Thameslink project team, the Network Rail system, LNER route, Network Rail’s Anglia route, Network Rail’s south-east route, Network Rail’s GTR as the operator and the industry readiness board. Network Rail is an arm’s-length public body with one member—the Secretary of State. He is the shareholder and he appoints the chief executive. He cannot walk away from the crossover between his Department and Network Rail.

Secondly, the GTR arrangements are not a classic franchise. GTR gives all the ticket revenue to the DFT—about £12 billion over the seven planned years of the franchise. In return, it gets back £9 billion to run the railway. The DFT takes all the revenue risk. When the railway fails to perform, it is a black hole for taxpayers. Crucially, the DFT sets the specification for the timetable, which I will say a few more words about.

Lastly, there is the rail industry readiness board, chaired by Chris Gibb, who was appointed by the Secretary of State. The representatives on the board include Network Rail’s south-east route, Network Rail’s LNER route, Network Rail’s Anglia route, Network Rail’s Thameslink project team, the Network Rail system, and the operator and the industry readiness board. In the Secretary of State’s account, we are asked to believe that all these organisations assured him that everything would be fine, that there was no contradictory advice from the people within those organisations, and that three weeks before, the green light had been given to go. I find that very difficult to square with the reality.

I turn to the decisions that have been made and the opportunities to avoid this crisis. First, the initial timetable was set in the franchise ITT—in invitation to tender—in 2014. We have no idea whether an operator can achieve 24 trains per hour through the Thameslink core, because the DFT assessed the four bidders and discovered that no one could design such a timetable. Even so, it gave this timetable planning task to GTR. Secondly, on rolling stock, the DFT ignored the warnings on financing trains, leading to a two-year delay in securing financing, instead of standing behind the decision. That resulted in late delivery, late trains, and a lack of training for drivers.

Thirdly, on the reliance on rest-day working, the Secretary of State is directly responsible for pouring fuel on the flames of the disputes when we could have moved to more modern working arrangements on the railway. Lastly, on the late timetable approach, the decision to downgrade the aspirations in July 2017 was made directly by him. There is no evidence that he did anything but stay asleep at the wheel when it came to seeing this through.

It is clear that the Secretary of State’s defence does not wash. Either someone is accountable for the railways or they are not. We need more than a ghost in the graveyard of the DFT.

3.46 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State can be in no doubt from the contributions across the House today that the rail chaos is having a devastating impact on people’s lives and jobs and on the economy.

The meltdown in the timetable and the revised timetable is causing serious pain to commuters. We have heard from hon. Members north, south, east and west. The whole nation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, is facing the pain. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) talked about how promised improvements were yet to be delivered, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), who highlighted that the £9 billion spent has led to more chaos. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) reminded us that the northern press has united in its call for the Secretary of State to resign.

My hon. Friends the Members for Eastington (Grahame Morris), for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for Luton South (Mr Shuker) have all highlighted forensically how the buck stops with the Secretary of State. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) shared heartrending stories of her constituents sardined into trains and having their safety put at risk due to overcrowding.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Western Mail has said that the Severn tunnel will now be shut for three weeks as the rail electrification kit rusts before it has even been used. Does my hon. Friend agree that if true, this is shocking, and that there need to be further checks to ensure that this important infrastructure project will be fit for purpose?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend makes the point so well—more chaos on our railways.

In the past 24 hours, hundreds of passengers have shared their experiences with me, including a relationship breaking down, trains so packed that people are standing for hours while paying more for their tickets, cancellations of trains for hours on end, and people leaving home at 5.30 in the morning to face a four or five-hour commute. One person had no choice but to walk home for four hours in the rain in the middle of their exams. There is lots of stress about getting to work on time and getting home to pick up the children, and lots of stress for those sitting exams and simply not knowing if they will get there on time.

A mother had to sing “Happy Birthday” to her child from Waterloo station because she would not make it home for their birthday.
We all know that the problem is much deeper rooted. Were Robert Adley alive today, he would have seen himself truly vindicated for his call to halt the Railways Act 1993, for he foresaw how fragmentation would eventually create complete chaos across the railways, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), the shadow Transport Secretary, set out. Mr Adley dubbed that Bill the then Tory Government’s “poll tax on wheels”. The fate of the poll tax is a stark reminder of what happens when Governments continue to blame everyone but themselves and fail to listen to the public. The public now overwhelmingly call for the renationalisation of the railways, which Labour will deliver.

The failure of one part of the Secretary of State’s Department to talk to the other, with franchises promising one thing despite Network Rail not having the capacity to deliver on his promises, demonstrates that the buck stops with no one but the Secretary of State. No Government can sleepwalk their way through a crisis, and this weak and floundering Government most certainly cannot. To ignore the public, to ignore the industry and now to ignore Members of this House shows utter contempt, for which the public will not be forgiving—not least when people have lost their jobs, been unable to sit vital exams, or missed precious moments of family life. Passengers are exhausted from working very long days due to their uncertain commutes. Passengers are unable to plan. Passengers are unable to have any form of life as their short journeys have been replaced by waits at stations that are 10 times the length of their journeys.

It is clear that commuters are not just frustrated with this totally avoidable Government failure, but with their own MPs for not securing change at the top. Today, we all have the opportunity to make the necessary change. If it is not addressed today, it most certainly will be at the ballot box, and MPs who were silent today when they had the chance to act on behalf of their constituents will find that those constituents will vote accordingly come the next general election.

The problem is that all this rail chaos, which was well known in advance by the Secretary of State, was allowed to happen on his watch because he put his ideology of private interests ahead of public service, because he failed to co-ordinate franchises across the divides in his Department, because he did not intervene and stop the timetable changes when he had the chance to do so, and because he evidently has put himself and his career above passengers and theirs. He was warned time and again but failed to act.

This afternoon’s vote is simply about confidence. Voting against the motion or even sitting on your hands would not only highlight how hon. Members are complicit in the chaos that has ensued over the last few weeks, but show support for how the Secretary of State conducted his Department, his actions in the months preceding the introduction of the new timetable, and the way in which he has let the public down consistently over the last 30 days. Constituents who were late to work again this morning will want to know how their MP voted today—did they place their confidence in the Secretary of State, despite all that has happened, or were they willing to stand up for their constituents and vote for this motion? When constituents miss their family meal and time with their children tonight, will they look up to their MP for taking action through the first step of removing the heart of the problem—the Secretary of State—or will they remember that their MP, when given the opportunity to do something, sidestepped the issue?

Perhaps the Prime Minister will show her full support for the Secretary of State this afternoon by neither voting for the motion nor taking any action to replace the person at the heart of the crisis, thus tying her own leadership to this national public disaster, or perhaps she will start to distance herself from all that has happened and find someone who can respond to this crisis. Surely she cannot continue to back a Secretary of State who has not only failed rail passengers but will continue to preside over the chaos that, as we have heard, he will unable to resolve for weeks if not months. Anyone who understands the need to make a fresh start after a public disaster knows that they need to deal with those responsible, which in this case means pulling Northern and GTR back into public ownership with immediate effect. The public will not forget how the avoidable rail chaos was woefully responded to.

There is one more issue that I want to raise: public safety. Even as we speak, public safety is being put at risk. We heard the Secretary of State take a swipe at the unions—he always does—but they represent the very people who work relentlessly across the network and, in particular, have kept passengers safe over the past few weeks. They have taken action today because they fear for public safety as guards are removed from trains. They are right to do so. If anything makes the case for guards on trains, it is the experiences of the last month. The guards are the very people who help the public in times of need. Labour will never put ideology above safety, let alone public service.

There is another public service issue on which the Secretary of State is failing. In this chaos, I have heard reports of stations crammed with passengers and trains crammed with people. Those people are fortunate to get on board—disabled people have been left stranded at stations because they cannot push their way on to trains. This is a seriously unsafe situation. The country must remember above all that national disasters have occurred when people have been squeezed into spaces that are too tight to hold them. When they are not just standing for hours on their commute but physically restrained on trains, it is easy to imagine how someone could fall on the tracks or fall ill on a train, especially in this heat. If nothing more, all hon. and right hon. Members should vote with Labour to put down a clear heat. If nothing more, all hon. and right hon. Members should vote with Labour to put down a clear
and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). It was also reflected by Opposition Members, including the hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), who spoke powerfully about the difficult travelling conditions that their constituents have faced in recent weeks.

I want to reassure colleagues on both sides of the House that the Department’s overriding priority is to restore the reliability of service across the network. The Secretary of State has left the rail industry under no illusion that it must urgently improve its operational response including, if necessary, by changing top management, as is now happening at GTR. He has commissioned an independent inquiry by Stephen Glaister of the Office of Rail and Road, the independent regulator, to examine why we are in this situation and to reduce the chances of it ever happening again.

Turning to the performance on Northern, passengers continue to experience disruption on some parts of the network. There is a long way to go until performance is where it needs to be, but we are beginning to turn the corner. The introduction of a temporary timetable by Northern on 4 June will help to rebuild passengers’ trust. The first signs are promising, as industry figures show that over the first two weeks of the reduced timetable, 80% of trains arrived on time, and 4% of trains were cancelled or arrived significantly late. In the previous fortnight, 66% of trains arrived on time and an average of 12% of trains were cancelled or were significantly late. That improvement must continue over the coming weeks.

Ian Mearns: That all sounds very nice—a real improvement. However, according to the BBC this morning—this is certainly the evidence that we have all heard from our constituents—11,000 trains on the Northern rail network have been either cancelled or delayed for more than 30 minutes. That is tens of thousands of passengers to plan ahead more effectively. Alternative travel arrangements are in place. For example, passengers on the Brighton main line can have their Thameslink tickets accepted on Gatwick Express, and next month GTR will introduce a full temporary timetable across its network as the next step to improve reliability and performance for passengers.

It is worth noting that some parts of the GTR network, including all of Southern, are now experiencing more train services and better performance than ever before. However, I do not consider the service to be anywhere near approaching one that I or passengers would find acceptable and, as the Secretary of State said, we are examining why GTR is taking longer than Northern to improve services. The review that has been commissioned will look at whether GTR has met and is continuing to meet its contractual obligations in the planning and delivery of the May timetable.

Mr Shuker: Does the Minister believe that GTR should be operating the franchise at the next major timetable change in December 2018?

Joseph Johnson: That question will be addressed in the review, which is looking carefully at GTR’s performance and whether it has breached any of its contractual franchise commitments. That is not something that we can pre-empt. We are looking at it carefully in the review and, as the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks, nothing is off the table.

Clive Efford: The Minister says that, but why is Govia being allowed to re-bid for franchises or to bid for others?

Joseph Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman will understand, it is important that the Department acts consistently and treats train operating companies consistently across the industry. The Department is carefully reviewing whether GTR has breached any of its franchise commitments, and we will do that thoroughly, following all correct due processes, as everybody has a right to expect us to.

Let me turn to compensation. We are clear that passengers on the lines that have been severely affected by these issues will receive additional compensation. The Department is working closely with Network Rail, train operators and stakeholders to introduce a special compensation scheme as soon as possible. We have already recommended to the board of Transport for the North that passengers who buy weekly, monthly or annual tickets on affected Northern and TPE routes should be eligible to claim up to four weeks’ compensation. As part of the scheme, the industry will be providing financial support to Transport for the North to deal with other costs that have arisen from the disruption.

I expect the board of TfN to confirm the final details of the scheme by its next meeting on 28 June and for payments to begin for Northern in early July. The Secretary of State has also announced a compensation package for passengers who travel on affected Thameslink and Great Northern routes. As he said, it will follow the special compensation scheme for Southern and TPE. Finally, we are looking at options to further support the northern economy and expect Northern to fund a marketing campaign encouraging travel to affected areas by train, including the Lakes.
I hope that this has reassured right hon. and hon. Members of the seriousness with which the Government are taking the disruption facing passengers. We are taking action to resolve the problems as quickly as possible, to compensate passengers appropriately, and to learn the lessons that will prevent this happening again in the future.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am about to close the doors, as I normally do after eight minutes, but I understand that there is a problem with the lifts in Norman Shaw. I am acutely aware that some colleagues are coming by wheelchair and others, with the lifts in Norman Shaw. I am acutely aware that there is a problem about to close the doors, as I normally do after eight minutes, but I understand that there is a problem. I am looking hopefully to see if we have succeeded—we have almost succeeded, but not quite. I could describe a wheelchair could not get into it.

It is hard to believe that a lift was full and a colleague in here, who I trust will vote as swiftly as possible, but for some colleagues are coming by wheelchair and other, taking action to resolve the problems as quickly as possible, to compensate passengers appropriately, and to learn the lessons that will prevent this happening again in the future.

Confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport

Division No. 189 [4.5 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amessbury, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradhshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debono-Dead, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dods, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fris, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Atzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lindon, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport

249 250
Boles, Nick Blunt, Crispin Blackman, Bob Beresford, Sir Paul Baron, Mr John Barclay, Stephen Baldwin, Harriett Baker, Mr Steve Badenoch, Mrs Kemi Argar, Edward Andrew, Stuart Aldous, Peter Allen, Lucy Almen, Heidi Amess, Sir David Andrew, Stuart Argar, Edward Bacon, Mr Richard Badenoch, Mrs Kemi Baker, Mr Steve Baldwin, Harriett Barclay, Stephen Baron, Mr John Bebb, Guto Bellingham, Sir Henry Benyon, rh Richard Beresford, Sir Paul Berry, Jake Blackman, Bob Blunt, Crispin Boles, Nick Bottomley, Sir Peter Smith, Angela Smith, Eleanor Smith, Laura Smith, Nick Smith, Owen Smyth, Karin Sobel, Alex Speffir, rh John Stamer, rh Keir Stephens, Chris Stevens, Jo Stone, Jamie Streeting, Wes Stringer, Graham Sweeney, Mr Paul Taki, Mark Thewliss, Alison Thomas, Gareth Thomas-Symonds, Nick Thornberry, rh Emily Timms, rh Stephen Trickett, Jon Turley, Anna Turner, Karl Twigg, Stephen Twist, Liz Umunna, Chuka Vaz, Valerie Walker, Thelma Watson, Tom West, Catherine Western, Matt Whitehead, Dr Alan Whittfield, Martin Williams, Dr Paul Williamson, Chris Wilson, Phil Wishart, Pete Woodcock, John Yasin, Mohammad Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Jeff Smith and Vicky Foxcroft

Clark, rh Greg Clarke, Mr Simon Cleverly, James Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey Coffey, Dr Thérèse Collins, Damian Costa, Alberto Courts, Robert Cox, Mr Geoffrey Crabb, rh Stephen Crouch, Tracey Davies, Chris Davies, David T. C. Davies, Glyn Davies, Philip Davis, rh Mr David Dinenage, Caroline Djanogly, Mr Jonathan Docherty, Leo Dodds, rh Nigel Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M. Donelan, Michelle Double, Steve Dowden, Oliver Doyle-Price, Jackie Drax, Richard Duddridge, James Duguid, David Duncan, rh Sir Alan Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain Dunne, Mr Philip Ellis, Michael Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias Elphicke, Charlie Eustice, George Evans, Mr Nigel Evennett, rh Sir David Fabricant, Michael Fallon, rh Sir Michael Field, rh Mark Ford, Vicky Foster, Kevin Fox, rh Dr Liam Francois, rh Mr Mark Fraser, Lucy Freeman, George Freer, Mike Fysh, rh 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 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert Gove, rh Michael Graham, Luke Graham, Richard Grant, Bill Grant, Mr Peter Helen Gray, James Grayling, rh Chris Green, Chris Green, rh Damian Grieve, rh Mr Dominic Griffiths, Andrew Gyimah, Mr Sam Hair, Kirstene Halfon, rh Robert Hall, Luke Hammond, rh Mr Philip Hancock, rh Matt Hands, rh Greg Harper, rh Mr Mark Harrington, Richard Harris, Rebecca Harrison, Trudy Hart, Simon Hayes, rh Mr John Heald, rh Sir Oliver Heappey, James Heaton-Harris, Chris Henderson, Gordon Herbert, rh Nick Hermon, Lady Hinds, rh Damian Hoare, Simon Hollingbery, George Hollinrake, Kevin Hollobone, Mr Philip Holloway, Adam Howell, John Huddleston, Nigel Hughes, Eddie Hurd, rh Mr Nick Jack, Mr Alister James, Margot Javid, rh Sajid Jayawardena, Mr Ranil Jenkin, Sir Bernard Jenkyns, Andrea Jenrick, Robert Johnson, rh Boris Johnson, Dr Caroline Johnson, Gareth Johnson, Joseph Jones, Andrew Jones, rh Mr David Jones, Mr Marcus Kawczynski, Daniel Keegan, Gillian Kennedy, Seema Kerr, Stephen Knight, rh Sir Greg Knight, Julian Kwarteng, Kwasi Lamont, John Lancaster, rh Mark Latham, Mrs Pauline Leadsom, rh Andrea Lee, Dr Philip Lefroy, Jeremy Leigh, Sir Edward Letwin, rh Sir Oliver Lewer, Andrew Lewis, rh Brandon Lewis, rh Dr Julian Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian Lidington, rh Mr David Little Pengelly, Emma Lopez, Julia Lopresti, Jack Lord, Mr Jonathan Mackinlay, Craig Maclean, Rachel Main, Mrs Anne Mak, Alan Malthouse, Kit Mann, Scott Masterton, Paul

Confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport

19 JUNE 2018

Hall, Luke Halfon, rh Robert Hair, Kirstene Gauke, rh Mr David Grayling, rh Chris Grant, Sir Michael Gove, rh Michael Graham, Luke Grant, Bill Grant, Mrs Helen Gray, James Grayling, rh Chris Green, Chris Green, rh Damian Grieve, rh Mr Dominic Griffiths, Andrew Gyimah, Mr Sam Hair, Kirstene Halfon, rh Robert Hall, Luke Hammond, rh Mr Philip Hancock, rh Matt Hands, rh Greg Harper, rh Mr Mark Harrington, Richard Harris, Rebecca Harrison, Trudy Hart, Simon Hayes, rh Mr John Heald, rh Sir Oliver Heappey, James Heaton-Harris, Chris Henderson, Gordon Herbert, rh Nick Hermon, Lady Hinds, rh Damian Hoare, Simon Hollingbery, George Hollinrake, Kevin Hollobone, Mr Philip Holloway, Adam Howell, John Huddleston, Nigel Hughes, Eddie Hurd, rh Mr Nick Jack, Mr Alister James, Margot Javid, rh Sajid Jayawardena, Mr Ranil Jenkin, Sir Bernard Jenkyns, Andrea Jenrick, Robert Johnson, rh Boris Johnson, Dr Caroline Johnson, Gareth Johnson, Joseph Jones, Andrew Jones, rh Mr David Jones, Mr Marcus Kawczynski, Daniel Keegan, Gillian Kennedy, Seema Kerr, Stephen Knight, rh Sir Greg Knight, Julian Kwarteng, Kwasi Lamont, John Lancaster, rh Mark Latham, Mrs Pauline Leadsom, rh Andrea Lee, Dr Philip Lefroy, Jeremy Leigh, Sir Edward Letwin, rh Sir Oliver Lewer, Andrew Lewis, rh Brandon Lewis, rh Dr Julian Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian Lidington, rh Mr David Little Pengelly, Emma Lopez, Julia Lopresti, Jack Lord, Mr Jonathan Mackinlay, Craig Maclean, Rachel Main, Mrs Anne Mak, Alan Malthouse, Kit Mann, Scott Masterton, Paul

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Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Moore, Damien  
Mordaunt, rh Penny  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
Morrison, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, rh Caroline  
O’Brien, Neil  
Oford, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Parish, Neil  
Patel, rh Priti  
Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Penna, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, rh Claire  
Phip, Chris  
Pincher, Christopher  
Poulter, Dr Dan  
Pow, Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Frisak, Mr Mark  
Pritchard, Mark  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Roberson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, Mr Bob  
Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, rh Julian  
Smith, Royston  
Soubry, rh Anna  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stephenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, lain  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Mr Gary  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
Symms, Sir Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Throup, Maggie  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Vaiyze, rh Mr Edward  
Vara, Mr Shaiilesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim

Question accordingly negatived.

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill: Committee Stage

4.20 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 48 and the practice of the House relating to the authorisation of charges upon the public revenue, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee has leave to consider the Clauses of the Bill and any new Clauses that may be proposed to it; but the Bill may not be reported from the Committee before this House has passed a Money Resolution, for which the Queen’s Recommendation has been signified, in relation to the Bill.

Here we are again, debating the same issue: by all accounts, according to custom and practice and convention in Standing Orders, the position is, quite simply, that a money resolution follows a private Member’s Bill, but my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) has still not been given a money resolution for his Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill 2017-19. However, the motion makes a slightly different proposal, so I hope that the House can agree to it. It proposes that we can debate the Bill before the Report stage, at which point it will be given its money resolution.

Let me deal first with the Bill itself, and then with some of the objections that have been expressed by the Leader of the House and others. I hope that by the end of my speech, I shall have persuaded Members that the House can give the hon. Lady a very good reason. She may be familiar with the e-mail that Members received on 14 June from the Boundary Commission for England, in which it confirms that it will report to the Leader of the House on or before 5 September, so that the Bill will be given its money resolution.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Perhaps I can give the hon. Lady a very good reason. She may be familiar with the e-mail that Members received on 14 June from the Boundary Commission for England, in which it confirms that it will report to the Leader of the House on or before 5 September, so that the Bill will be given its money resolution.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his speech. I will address that point later in my own speech.

The Bill had the support of the House, so it proceeded to its next stage; but then it was thwarted—not once, not twice, not thrice, but six times. The first issue raised was that of costs. The Leader of the House said that it would cost £12 million, but, as I have said before, the instructions to the Boundary Commission were flawed. It was instructed to make the electorate numbers fit the areas as allocated in 2011. It uses the register of electors from 2017, or 10 years. It proposes that the commission should report every 10 years, but the Government want to scrub that and require it to report every five years.

I want to know why the Government consider 600 to be an appropriate figure on the basis of an old electoral register.
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Obviously Ministers are drawn from Parliament. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the number of MPs is reduced but the number of Ministers is not, a considerable amount of power will shift from Parliament to Government? If the Government’s proposal were even-handed, the number of Ministers would be reduced so that power would not be transferred from Parliament to the Government.

Valerie Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I will be drawing on it. Let me add, however, that as early as tomorrow we will see the effect of an overbearing Executive, and will see why it is so important for Members to be able to hold the Government to account.

If the Bill were allowed a Committee stage as a result of the motion, the debate on my hon. Friend’s Bill could explore the reasons for it. The Government could table new clauses and vote against clauses in the Bill, as many Conservative Members have suggested. Amendments could be tabled, too. This motion would allow that to take place so that hon. Members on both sides would be aware of why the Government object.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) must be psychic as I am now going to touch on the point he made. I have asked this previously, but will the Leader of the House confirm in relation to the payroll vote whether there will be a reduction in the number of Ministers and what costs will be saved by a reduction in the payroll vote? There is more work to be done as we leave the European Union and post-Brexit both for Parliament and for the Executive, but this means that the Executive will dominate Parliament, and if costs were an issue, ministerial numbers would also be reduced. However, the Government are incurring more costs in Parliament. What are the costs of the peers? In the last seven years, 260 have been appointed.

My second point—[Interruption.] I do not know if that was an intervention. The Leader of the House refers to things being done on a case-by-case basis. What is that, and since when do the Government decide which Bills ought to be progressed? She seems to have come up with a new case-by-case basis Standing Order. I have checked the latest edition of the Blue Book—May 2018—and there is no entry for “case-by-case basis.” This means that the Government are twisting convention by saying they will decide which Bills are worthy of a money resolution. All Bills should be treated fairly, which is the basis of the convention.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Why is there this sudden interest in money resolutions from the Labour party? I cannot find a single instance of the Labour party in government looking to change the rules surrounding money resolutions, so is it simply for political expediency that this motion has been introduced today?

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is an assiduous lawyer so he will know we are talking about the present. We are talking about money resolutions and about other Bills that are also stacked up, and it is a convention of the House, here and now, that the Government should provide money resolutions.

How can the Government justify picking and choosing which Bill gets a money resolution? This is not an elected dictatorship. It appears that the Government are acting in the same way here, by thwarting the will of the House, as in the abusive process that we saw last Friday on the upskirting Bill. I hope I can help: it is a bit like England finishing its qualifying round having won its league and FIFA saying, “I’m sorry, but we won’t allow you to go through; we’re going to deal with this on a case-by-case basis.” That would be an outrage: if England are at the top of the league, England should go through.

This is a serious issue because it goes to the very heart of our democracy. Some 2.1 million people have been left off the register and have not been included in the Boundary Commission’s dealings. This is an especially serious issue as the boundary changes appear to favour one party. We must remember that the current Government are a minority Government governing only with a confidence and supply agreement.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Government have wilfully plucked a figure out of the air, have manipulated the electoral register and taken 2.5 million people off it. The constituencies have no basis, so the Bill of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—[Interruption.] If the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), Conservative Members wants to make a contribution, she can do so when I am not on my feet.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot interrupt himself when making an intervention while referring to a sedentary comment from the Conservative Benches, but I will allow him to finish his perfectly reasonable intervention.

Mr Mahmood: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have gained further knowledge.

My hon. Friend’s Bill tries to address this issue. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) agree that this is not about gerrymandering or taking powers away from this House, but about restoring those powers?

Valerie Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and he is right. This is about democracy, about using the old register and about fettering the Boundary Commission.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that the Boundary Commission is an independent body that is completely separate from any political considerations? It is not run by politicians. It is carrying out a thorough review, on the instructions of this House, in order to do the right thing for our constituents and for taxpayers. How can she suggest that there is any political consideration involved in the body’s work?

Valerie Vaz: No one is talking about political interference. We are talking about the initial instructions that were given to the Boundary Commission, which were based on flawed instructions.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): While we are still on the issue of the size of constituencies, does my hon. Friend recognise that there are a number of
constituencies—mostly, though not entirely, inner-city ones—in which the population is far greater than the registered population? I declare an interest here, because my own constituency has a population twice the size of the registered population. This is only going to get worse with the arbitrary reduction to 600 Members, further reducing the connection between Members of Parliament and those they serve.

Valerie Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We deal with cases that go beyond those on the electoral register. For example, we deal with whole families, including children, following the cutbacks in advice services. We still have to deal with those cases.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend also agree that there are variations in the propensity of certain groups in the population to appear on the electoral register? For example, there is an 80% propensity for older women from the home counties to be on the register, compared with only a 20% likelihood for young black men in inner cities to be on it.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Further to those last two points, would my hon. Friend acknowledge that the amount of constituency work required from a Member often bears no relation to the number of people on the electoral register? I dare say that about a third of the people who come to my surgeries for advice and support are not registered to vote.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree. All hon. Members know that we deal with such issues and cases, and that we cannot turn people away, because we are often the last resort.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I believe that the hon. Lady is complaining that reducing the number of Members of Parliament will create an unacceptable workload, but when I look at the statistics, I see that British MPs each represent about 90,000 people, whereas Spanish MPs represent about 133,000, German MPs represent 116,000 and French and Dutch MPs represent 114,000. Why should we not be able to do at least as good a job as the MPs in other leading European democracies?

Valerie Vaz: I am not saying that this is just about an increase in workload. I am saying that the Boundary Commission’s ability to look at everything should be unfettered.

My third point is that this is not another argument about not receiving an email. In the last debate on this matter, the Leader of the House said that an email had not been received and that this was just a matter for the Westminster bubble. This is not just about responsive democracy. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton is proactive, and he saw a sense of unfairness. As with any Bill, we try to do something when we see something that is unfair or when we want to close a loophole. That was exactly the reason for my hon. Friend’s Bill. Yes, some constituencies should be equalised—some rural constituencies might not have the same numbers as inner-city ones—but that must involve a proper analysis, and the Boundary Commission’s ability to use the numbers in local areas in a way that fits must be unfettered.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am listening with interest to what the hon. Lady is saying. Will she clarify something for me? Under the current instructions to the Boundary Commission and the principal legislation, a new review is carried out every five years and the number of seats allocated to each constituent part of the United Kingdom is adjusted according to the number of people on the register. Is it the purpose of her hon. Friend’s Bill to fix in perpetuity—or until such time as the legislation may be amended—the number of seats for Northern Ireland at 18?

Valerie Vaz: Under the Bill, the number would be fixed at 18. The seats would be allocated on the basis of the 2011 instructions, but nothing would be in perpetuity. No Parliament can bind another Parliament, so that could all change. The instructions could change.

Fourthly, what about the procedures of the House? I am sure you will agree that they are important, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Procedure Committee recommended in its 2013-14 report on private Members’ Bills “that the Government be required to make a written Ministerial statement on the reasons for the delay if a money or ways and means resolution, where required, has not been put to the House within three weeks of a bill being given a second reading.”

The Government response stated: “It is the responsibility of the Member in charge of the bill to make a request to Government to table any money or ways and means motions that may be required. It is the practice of the Government to accede to such requests... The Committee has not produced any clear evidence to suggest that current arrangements are not working or that a new rule is needed.”

However, the Government have not accorded to the request for a money resolution, and the current arrangements are clearly now not working. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has been thwarted six times. Will the Leader of the House join me in writing to the Procedure Committee to inform it that the Government are not following the procedure laid down by the Committee and rules of the House?

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I was elected on a manifesto that called for a reduction in the number of MPs to 600. How can I look my constituents in the eye and spend the equivalent of 600 nurses’ salaries on something for which they did not vote?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will write to him and place in the Library the list of things that the Government have reneged on since their manifesto.

More importantly, this matter is pressing because hon. Members will have received an email from the Boundary Commission, which says that it wants to report before the conference recess, so this is not about the Westminster bubble. Hon. Members were elected to be the guardians of democracy. Now more than ever, we need to stand as beacons of fairness, upholding democratic values and doing what is right. I hope that hon. Members will support the motion.
The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I welcome the chance to respond, yet again, on the subject of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. The House will be aware that I have already responded to both an urgent question and an emergency debate about the Government’s approach to the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), in addition to responding to questions at business questions. Nevertheless, I am more than happy to outline, once again, our approach to private Members’ Bills, and to the hon. Gentleman’s Bill in particular, before turning to the specific terms of the motion.

The boundary commissions began the 2018 parliamentary boundary review in 2016 and are due to report the final recommendations to the Government later this year—within just a few sitting weeks. This Government have made a commitment to continue with that boundary review, which was voted for by this House, and it would be inappropriate to proceed with the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill at this time by providing it with a money resolution. The Government have committed to keeping this private Member’s Bill under review, but it is right that we allow the boundary commissions to report their recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed.

As I said in the emergency debate on 21 May, progressing with this particular PMB would place a potential financial burden of £8 million on taxpayers. Given that Parliament—this House—has already committed to the 2018 boundary review, it would not be responsible for the Government to support such extra cost to the taxpayer at this point.

Mr Khalid Mahmood: To follow the Leader of the House’s reasoning about what this Bill will cost the public purse, what other Bills is she considering dropping to save money?

Andrea Leadsom: I will repeat it if the hon. Gentleman did not hear it, but I just carefully explained that the Government bring forward money resolutions for private Members’ Bill on a case-by-case basis. It is precisely because this House voted for the 2018 boundary review that we must wait until that work is finished before deciding how to progress with this private Member’s Bill.

With one review under way, plus an incomplete review from a previous Parliament, the review proposed by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton would be the third review of boundaries and would push the total cost of reviewing boundaries towards £18 million. The Opposition may not have a problem with unnecessarily spending £18 million of taxpayers’ money, but the Government certainly do. That is our position, and we look forward to seeing the boundary commissions’ recommendations in the coming months.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Leader of the House seems to be saying that one of the reasons why the Government will not table a money resolution is the amount of money the Bill would cost. I do not know whether she is inadvertently misleading the House, but the reality is that tabling a money resolution does not mean the law will pass. What then happens is that the Bill can be considered in Committee, on Report and by their lordships. The issue here is that the Government are running scared because they know a majority of Members of this House support the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), so they are trying to kill it in Committee. This is not about money; it is about parliamentary procedure being subverted.

Andrea Leadsom: I will come on to procedure, but the hon. Gentleman simply is not right. The Government are not killing this private Member’s Bill; we are saying that, until the boundary commissions have completed their work, which will be in a matter of a few weeks—the House voted for the review to take place—the Government will not take further action on a money resolution.

For the clarification of all hon. Members, Members, this is not without precedent. During the 2014-15 Session, the coalition Government did not table money resolutions on two private Members’ 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.]

Mr Harper: On procedure, there is a wider point than just the money. The boundary commissions, as part of their review, have carried out a very democratic process. They have listened to thousands of responses, not just from Members of this House and political parties but from thousands of members of the public. Would it not be an abuse just to throw all that away and start all over again?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. That is the whole point. The Government are saying we will not table a money resolution until we have had a chance to consider the review, which is currently under way and due to report soon. However, this debate is not about the merits of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, and it is not even about the merits of the Government tabling a money resolution on the Bill. This debate is about whether a Committee may have leave to disregard the rules and conventions of this House. This motion seeks to undermine a fundamental principle that is a cornerstone of our constitutional settlement.

The financial initiative of the Crown is a long-standing constitutional principle that allows the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. Chapter 32 of “Erskine May” explains: “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... to the levying of taxes to meet the expenditure of the State. But the role of Parliament in respect of...expenditure and taxation has never been one of initiation... 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”.

Either the Government of the day have the right to initiate financial proceedings or they do not. The Crown initiative is a binary issue, and this motion seeks to overturn it.

Nigel Dodds: There have been references to the boundary commission review as though there is just one review, but of course there are reviews in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. On a point of process,
[Nigel Dodds]

does the Leader of the House intend to table separate resolutions on each of those Boundary Commission reviews, or will they be taken together?

Andrea Leadsom: That is to be confirmed, but the right hon. Gentleman is correct that the boundary commissions of all four nations will be reporting imminently. It has been a huge and very expensive undertaking that absolutely upholds the principles of democracy.

Let us get back to what is under discussion today. The motion seeks to erode the fundamental principle that it is the Crown, through its Ministers, that has the exclusive right of demanding money and of defining the purposes for which that money is required. The core responsibility of the Government is accountability to the taxpayer. The Opposition may not understand that, but we on this side of the House most certainly do.

The motion would allow the Bill Committee to consider the substantive clauses of the Bill, amend the Bill and potentially introduce new material into the Bill. The conventions of the House are very clearly set out in “Erskine May”, which states that “any financial provisions which”—a Bill—“may contain must be authorised by a resolution of the House, i.e. a money resolution, before they can be considered by the committee on the bill.”

The financial provisions contained in a Bill—in this case the money clause, which is clause 5—are there on First Reading to indicate that the Crown initiative is needed. The existence of these money clauses, or in other cases the existence of italicised provisions, is the practice by which it is indicated that Second Reading is contingent on a financial recommendation from the Government. This financial recommendation must come before the House or its Committees can proceed with detailed consideration of the Bill’s contents.

If a Committee is allowed to consider the substance of the Bill in the absence of a money resolution, the Crown, through its Ministers, loses its centuries-old right to initiate and define the purposes for which that money is required; putting the power of the Executive into the hands of the legislation. This questions the role of the Executive, whichever party is in power. The fundamentals of having a Government—of having any Government—are that they are there to take decisions and to be accountable for those decisions. Taxpayers want and require the Government to be accountable for the way in which public money is spent. That is what it means to be a responsible Government.

Rachel Maclean: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is about a fundamental principle upon which our general elections are run: we set out our manifesto and the public vote on how they want their money spent? The attempt to change that is a fundamental undermining of our democracy in this country.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right on that. This Government are responsible for initiating financial transaction resolutions, and the Opposition and Parliament are responsible for scrutinising, amending and reviewing; they are not responsible for initiating resolutions. It is disappointing to waste parliamentary time today explaining this point to an Opposition who really should know better and who, in their actions today, are showing no signs that they would act as a responsible Government.

The motion would set a dangerous precedent, but there would also be further potential consequences of allowing it to pass. First, the scope of any money resolution is one of the factors in determining whether amendments are within the scope of a Bill. The change in practice that the motion seeks to introduce would remove that restriction on what can be considered and voted on in Committee. The Committee would be pointlessly wandering through the Bill, agreeing to clauses—with or without amendments—that may not actually be permitted by any money resolution that may or may not be forthcoming in future. Why should the House foot the bill for whatever the Committee decides?

The House must first provide financial authorisation, if and when the Government are ready to initiate it, and the Committee must then work to agree or amend the Bill in the light of that authorisation. The Committee should not be asking for the House’s retrospective forgiveness; it has to wait for the House’s permission for its money resolution. Ultimately, I would be very concerned with the situation in which the approval of this motion would leave the Bill Committee itself. It would make discussions in Committee theoretical at best, and at worst it would make the whole process farcical.

Secondly, it is worth remembering that once the Committee has been through the Bill, agreeing its provisions clause by clause, the Committee cannot refine those decisions. The motion would not empower the Committee, as the Opposition might seek to argue; it would actually disempower the Committee, giving it a false sense of
making progress while in fact damaging its ability to amend the Bill in the light of any developing circumstances that may in future give rise to a money resolution. I question whether all the members of the Bill Committee are fully aware of the terrible damage that the Opposition Front-Bench team are trying to impose on them.

This House runs on its conventions and on the assurance that centuries-old practice and procedure is there to protect the rights of all parliamentarians. The Government absolutely respect the right of the House to establish its own practices and procedures, but that respect must work both ways. A responsible Parliament must also respect the constitutional settlement, the relationship between Government and Parliament and the conventions that underpin the Crown initiative. By undermining all that for party political reasons by tabling this motion, the Opposition show how poorly they understand what it means to be responsible parliamentarians, let alone a responsible Government.

Financial responsibility is at the core of responsible government. Taxpayers have the right to see their Government held to account for how public money is handled, and it is Parliament’s legitimate right to hold the Government to account on that. However, Parliament—in the form of the Opposition or Back Benchers—does not have the right to undermine the Crown initiative on financial matters. Parliament does not have the right to propose taxation; that is a matter for the Government. Nor does Parliament have the right to bypass the need for the Government initiation of tax measures through, for example, Ways and Means resolutions. Parliament does not have the right to impose public spending; it is the Crown’s exclusive right, through Ministers, to propose increases in expenditure in a fiscally responsible way for which the Government are then held to account.

I am gravely concerned about the motion’s longer-term unintended consequences for the separation of powers between the Government and Parliament. Once the lines are blurred on decision making, the role of Parliament in scrutinising and holding the Government to account is put into jeopardy. Ultimately, a line does have to be drawn, and it is drawn under the historic practices of this House, under the constitutional rights of the Crown and under the long-established relationship between Government and Parliament. The line is there whether Opposition Members like it or not.

The Government are elected by the people, and the Government alone have the constitutional right and duty to initiate financial proceedings that are in the taxpayers’ interests, because it is the Government who are accountable to the taxpayer for their decisions and for defining the use of public money. Today, the Opposition are doing nothing more than abusing long-standing constitutional principles and seeking to manipulate the procedures of the House for political ends. At last year’s general election, the people of this great country had the opportunity to give the Leader of the Opposition the chance to be in charge of public spending. They did not take that opportunity. This Government will not allow the Opposition to take that opportunity by stealth, which is what is being attempted through this motion.

4.54 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Here we go again. Yet another debate on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill and yet another attempt from the Government to thwart it and stop any sort of progress. I listened carefully to the speech of the Leader of the House, and it was extraordinary. It was a sort of “Know your place, Parliament” assertion of the rights of the Crown, making the distinction somehow that this Government are not going to be accountable to Parliament in whatever this Parliament chooses to do. I have never heard a speech quite like it, and I hope that when the Leader of the House has a look at it in Hansard she will reflect on what she said. I have never known the House to be lectured in such a way about its rights and responsibilities. We are Members of Parliament, elected directly by our constituents, and we come here to make sure that their interest is properly and effectively represented. To be told just to know our place in the House and allow the Government to do whatever they want was quite disgraceful. I hope that the Leader of the House reflects on what she said today.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that providing a money resolution does not spend the money? All it does is allow Members to discuss the Bill line by line. That is what the Government are not allowing.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made that point to the Leader of the House. The money resolution does not commit the Government to anything in money terms. It allows the Bill to progress. At any point during that process the Government can come along with new clauses, and might have legitimate grounds for making sure that the Bill is delayed. I accept and respect that, but let the Bill progress for goodness’ sake.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The Leader of the House said that the Opposition were given a chance last year to become the Government and did not get it from the electorate, but she should be reminded that she did not get it either. She mentioned the Crown and ancient conventions a lot in her speech. She should remember what happened to a king who defied Parliament.

Pete Wishart: That is a salutary lesson from the hon. Gentleman. He knows and respects his history, and knows exactly what is being debated here and the impact that that type of speech has.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): This is not an area where I have expertise, but my understanding was that the money resolution enabled money to be spent in preparation for the Bill becoming law. So there is a financial implication of passing a money resolution, even if the Bill has not proceeded to Third Reading and Royal Assent.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman is right that he is not an expert on this particular issue; he has just demonstrated that by what he said. There is no obligation on the Government to commit money in a money resolution. A money resolution would allow the Committee stage of the Bill to be given the authority that the Leader of the House suggests this motion would not allow. I looked today at some of the proceedings of the Committee. It is like “Alice in Wonderland” meets “Groundhog Day”, without any progress. The Committee seems to come together and adjourn; as quickly as it sits
to consider some of the issues, proceedings are abandoned because there is nothing for the Committee to do. What an absolute and utter waste of time.

The key point is not Parliament’s responsibilities and the distinction between Government’s and Parliament’s roles in the House. The key issue is that the private Member’s Bills system is broken. It may be broken beyond repair. This is the fifth Parliament I have been involved in, and I have never known a Parliament to obsess so constantly and continually about private Members’ Bills. Usually they go through without any real issue or difficulty. The Leader of the House mentioned a couple of Bills under the coalition Government for which money resolutions were withheld. In the periphery of my memory, I remember those Bills, but that was about the first time in my 17 years in this place that the Government withheld money resolutions. We are entering a new sort of territory with this Government weapon to stop the progress of Bills that they do not particularly like. The House should consider deeply the increasing use of this method as a blocking tactic for private Members’ Bills before we continue down such an avenue.

Mr Harper: I think I can help the hon. Gentleman a little by explaining why there have been several such examples. It is because private Members’ Bills have started to be used inappropriately by people trying to deliver significant constitutional change, which should properly be done in detail on the Floor of the House. Perhaps that is why the Government have reflected carefully on whether they should allow money resolutions at every stage.

Pete Wishart: I have a reasonably neat solution in response to the right hon. Gentleman. If the Government do not like private Members’ Bills—if they object to them on constitutional grounds or for whatever reason—they should get up, tell the House and put their case on the Floor of the House. If the House agrees with the Government and finds particular issues and difficulties with a private Member’s Bill, the House can vote against it. If the House says, “No, we do not accept the Government’s arguments”, Members can vote for the Bill so that it passes. That is called democracy. The right hon. Gentleman used to believe in that principle. It is certainly something that I still value.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) is underestimating the power of private Members’ Bills historically in this House? They have paved the way for very big social change. For example, the Abortion Act 1967 and the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 by Lord Morris—both very powerful pieces of legislation—came via private Members’ Bills. They have always had a huge and significant impact, so what the right hon. Gentleman says is just nonsense.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to remind us of some of the really important private Members’ Bills in the history of the House. She will remember her colleague, Tom Clarke, who got two private Members’ Bills through Parliament: one on international development and another on disability. We owe a great deal of credit to Tom Clarke for what he did to ensure that those Bills were brought before Parliament. The Governments of the day were not prepared to consider those Bills, but Members of Parliament thought they were important enough to bring to the House, and to spend time and effort on getting them through. There are also really important private Members’ Bills in this Session. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is not here, but his Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill is really important. Again, that Bill has been stalled by this Government refusing to provide a money resolution.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Gentleman accused the Government of having an aversion to private Members’ Bills, but he also said that he has been here for five Parliaments. In fact, 22 private Members’ Bills were passed in the 2005 Parliament and 31 were passed in the 2010 Parliament. If we include the 2015 and 2017 Parliaments together, more than double the number of private Members’ Bills have been passed than in 2005. That is hardly an aversion to private Members’ Bills.

Pete Wishart: I do not think that I ever made the charge that this Government have an aversion to private Members’ Bills. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to be accusatory, I will accuse the Government of blocking Bills that they do not like. That is what we are getting to here. There are lots of Government-sponsored private Members’ Bills, a couple of which I have personally sponsored and that I want to see progress, so I am not saying that they have an aversion to them. I think that they value them as much as possible, but the system is broken just now. The current way in which we do this business is not satisfactory, and every Member of this House should be concerned about that.

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the reasons that the Government, under the current regime, are putting through so many private Members’ Bills is because they skip over the ones that they do not like. In the case of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), his Bill was 13th in the queue. The Government just decided that they did not like it, so they went to the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which was 92nd in the queue. We cannot have a situation whereby the Government decide just to skip over Bills. The Leader of the House spoke about overriding centuries-old tradition, but the centuries-old tradition is that we go to the next available Bill, so it is the Government who are riding roughshod over the procedures of the House.

Pete Wishart: That is right. I am trying to be helpful to the House, as always. You know me, Madam Deputy Speaker; if I can think of a way in which to bring the House together so that we can try to make satisfactory progress, I will offer it to the House. I see it as part of my job, obligation and responsibility as a Member of Parliament to see whether we can broker a solution. I suggest to the Leader of the House that the system is not working. I think that she and I would agree on that. She can nod her head if she wants.

Andrea Leadsom indicated dissent.
Pete Wishart: She is not nodding her head; she thinks that it is working satisfactorily. Okay, I may be on my own. In my view, and probably in that of most Members on both the Front Benches, something is not working with the system of dealing with private Members’ Bills. There is real disappointment and anger in this House about how all this is working out. This is the third time we have debated it, as the Leader of the House said, and it is not getting any better—if anything, it is getting worse. After her lecture to the House today, it feels a lot worse to Opposition Members.

If money resolutions are a sticking point, how about we try to design some sort of solution? I have tried to suggest this notion to Conservative Members: if they do not like something, they should come here on a Friday to oppose it and get their way; and if they do not get their way, they should accept the role of the House. We are going to have to try to find a way round this. We cannot continually come back to the point where Members secure support for their Bill from this House, believe that they are making progress with it, and then are ultimately blocked by a Government who do not like it and so are not prepared to give it a money resolution.

I do not know how we might do this, but may I suggest to the Leader of the House that we try to get a cross-party solution? I know that it has been suggested that the matter should be put to the Procedure Committee. That has happened twice in my time in this House. We had the Procedure Committee consider private Members’ Bills, and maybe it should do so again. How about if all the parties got together and tried to see what can be done again. How about if we try to design some sort of solution? I have tried to suggest this notion to Conservative Members: if they do not like something, they should come here on a Friday to oppose it and get their way; and if they do not get their way, they should accept the role of the House. We are going to have to try to find a way round this. We cannot continually come back to the point where Members secure support for their Bill from this House, believe that they are making progress with it, and then are ultimately blocked by a Government who do not like it and so are not prepared to give it a money resolution.

I was out in my constituency campaigning over the weekend. Our constituents look at these sorts of issues and get more and more concerned. We have a particular issue in Scotland. People in Scotland are furious about the disrespect that this Government have shown to our nation in taking about 15 minutes to turn the devolution settlement on its head. However, they are also seeing some of these issues about private Members’ Bill going through. [Interruption.] I know that Conservative Members do not like it, but this perception is building up. I saw over the weekend that there is bewilderment more than hostility. What is the House of Commons doing? Why cannot we properly debate issues that are really important? Why cannot we consider private Members’ Bills?

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What my constituents and most people in Scotland, I think, got frustrated with and annoyed by was the pantomime performance we saw last week of SNP Members storming out of the House, not representing the interests of their constituents or of Scotland. The Leader of the House spoke very well about the importance of the Government keeping control of financial resolutions. I would be interested to know if the right hon. Gentleman would advocate the same proposal for the Scottish Parliament with regard to how the Scottish Government manage similar matters.

Pete Wishart: First of all, I am not a right hon. Member. For some reason, Scottish National party Members are not made Privy Counsellors, regardless of how long we have served in this House. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the promotion, but I have never actually secured that position.

I wish that the hon. Gentleman had been on the streets in Perth, as I was, on Saturday. He would have seen the deep frustration and anger that there was with this House after the massive disrespect demonstrated to our Parliament—the Scottish Parliament—which secured 15 minutes of debate before its devolution settlement was turned on its head. There is a growing frustration with this House as more and more people, particularly in Scotland, are seeing—because they like watching us speak—how this House is treated. There is real bewilderment about what is going on.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I hesitate to move the hon. Gentleman off one of his favourite topics, but does he agree that there is another fundamental point that is being missed? The current boundary review is inaccurate because its formulations do not include the many extra voters who have gone on to the electoral rolls since the Boundary Commission did its basic analysis. This needs to be done again, and that would strengthen our democracy.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I know that a lot of people want to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will try to make a bit of progress if I could be allowed to do so.

I hear what the Government are saying. Of course, there is the news that we will have the report of the Boundary Commission before we come back in September. However, my feeling—perhaps it is just me again—is that what the House decided on the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) trumps what the Boundary Commission is about to deliver, because it was a democratic decision of the House that favoured his Bill and wanted to see it progress. My understanding is that that should come first. I think that outcomes decided on the Floor of the House—

Mr Harper rose—

Pete Wishart: I will not give way. I have given way to the right hon. Gentleman before, and I know that Madam Deputy Speaker wants me to rush. I believe that outcomes decided on the Floor of the House take precedence over anything that the Boundary Commission review will conclude. As hon. Members have said, there is not a majority for what the Boundary Commission is proposing. At some point, that will have to be tested in the House. The House will either have to agree that we should cut the number of our constituencies to 600 or say to the Government that we need 650 Members.

There are good reasons why the number should stay at 650, and they have been outlined. We will lose our 73 Members of the European Parliament in March next year, so all their responsibilities and duties will have to be prosecuted by Members of this Parliament. The point was also made about the relative imbalance that there would be between Members of Parliament and the Executive if there were 600 MPs, with more Ministers per Member of Parliament. That is a real point. Then there is the absurd circus down the corridor—the House of Lords. We are talking about reducing the size of Parliament, while there is one new Member of the House of Lords after one another. We have to be very careful about all those things.

The key point that the Leader of the House made today was that this is all about precedent, because it is in “Erskine May” and the Standing Orders of the House.
that the Government have the right to introduce money resolutions. Let us take that out of their hands. Another solution that the Leader of the House might want to consider is that once a private Member’s Bill passes its Second Reading, a money resolution should be put forthwith to the House. If the Government disagree with the money resolution, they should put forward their reservation at that point, which would allow the House to make a decision. What is the point of this private Member’s Bill purgatory that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton is experiencing? It is not fair to him, for a start. Why can we not do that at the outset of the process?

Lastly, this is about the democratic outcomes of the House and how we do our business. We dispense with that at our peril. We have to look carefully at how we are organised in this House and how it is being observed. Private Members’ Bills are a feature of this House that our constituents like. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhan McDonagh) mentioned the big, important pieces of legislation that have been passed as private Members’ Bills. We mess with them at our peril. They are broken just now: they are not working. Let us see if we can work together to find a solution that will allow us to continue to enjoy bringing pieces of legislation to the House as ordinary Members and make sure that they are not obstructed by Government. For goodness’ sake, surely we can achieve that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a well-subscribed debate. If colleagues stick to a maximum of nine minutes, we should be able to get everybody in. I call Mark Harper.

5.12 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will be mindful of your injunction and try hard to stick to it.

I am going to do something radical—I will try to stick to the motion—but first, since this is a debate, I want to deal with a number of points that Members have made. I should declare my interest as a member of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Public Bill Committee. We spend very pleasant Wednesday mornings in Committee Room 11, where civilised discussions take place between the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), myself and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for the Scottish National party. We gambol around the issues as far as we are able to, staying in order of the motion to adjourn. It is certainly not purgatory.

I will repeat, albeit at greater length, what I said in an intervention on the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). We have received a message from the Boundary Commission for England. I received it as a Member representing an English seat, and I presume that the other boundary commissions will write to Members who represent other parts of the United Kingdom, if they have not already, to confirm the process that they have undertaken. The Boundary Commission for England carried out a consultation that was widely publicised. It received more than 35,000 individual responses, which represents a great deal of interest from members of the public. The commission has confirmed that it will report its recommendations to the Leader of the House on or shortly before 5 September to give her the opportunity to lay the report in Parliament before the conference recess. I raise that point because it sits squarely with the timing issue.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), but I have to confess that even when I was the Minister taking through the Bill that became the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, I was not over-run by constituents grabbing me to discuss the finer details of that legislation. Clearly his constituents are different, taking a massive interest in these constitutional matters, but it was not my experience that people were hanging on to every detail of such matters.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my near neighbour for giving way. If his constituency wasemasculated, as mine was, a different number of issues might have been raised by those said constituents.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but the point about the Boundary Commission review is that there has been clear public consultation, with 35,000 responses from participants, meaning that this was a democratic process. The Boundary Commission has undertaken a clear process in coming to its conclusions.

People outside the House may think that September is a long way away, but it is only four full sitting weeks away, so it is sensible that we do what the Government suggest and wait for the Boundary Commission reports to be produced, for the Government to have an opportunity to introduce Orders in Council, and for the House to make a decision. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, who did not take an intervention from me, but he was factually wrong in saying that a motion in the House should trump what the boundary commissions are doing. I fundamentally disagree, because the commissions obey an Act of Parliament—the law of the land passed by both Houses of Parliament. I know that he does not accept the other end of the building as a legitimate part of Parliament, but it is until that is changed. Parliament passed an Act and that is the law of the land. That is what the boundary commissions are following, and a motion of the House does not trump an Act of Parliament; only another Act of Parliament can trump it. Fundamentally, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s premise.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is not the point that a previous Parliament, which does not bind this Parliament, passed a set of guidelines for the Boundary Commission that this Parliament thinks were not accurate and do not take in the right detail, and that that has bound the hands of the Boundary Commission? We are not complaining about the work of the Boundary Commission but, unfortunately, about the work of a previous Parliament. This Parliament, which is not bound by that Parliament, has agreed that a Bill that would change those requirements should go into Committee. All that we are asking for is a consideration of this Parliament’s views.
Mr Harper: I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman, but he is not right. The previous Parliament passed an Act that remains the law until another piece of legislation changes it. That has not happened. A motion in the House has not in itself changed the law. I shall come on to the point about process.

Sir Desmond Swayne rose—

Mr Harper: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will make a little progress because I am mindful of Madam Deputy Speaker’s injunction about trying to keep our remarks to nine minutes.

I want to gambol through some of the points made by the shadow Leader of the House, including what she said about numbers. As the Minister who introduced the original legislation, may I say that there is nothing magical about 600? I was asked the question at the time, and it was a manifesto commitment when we were elected in 2010 that we would reduce the size of the House to save money. It was a reduction of about 10%, but we settled on a sensible number rather than a random one. There was nothing magical about it. There was a huge suspicion among Opposition Members that that was some magical number with magical properties. It was not—it was a round number that was significantly lower than 650. The reduction would save a significant amount of money, but there was nothing particularly suspicious about the number.

The shadow Leader of the House mentioned the Opposition’s wish to move from boundary reviews every five years to every 10 years. There was a specific reason why we went for five. There is a choice to be made. My own view is that we can either have infrequent boundary reviews, which will be significant, because there will be a lot of population movement in between, or we can have more frequent boundary reviews which, by virtue of that fact, will be less disruptive because they take lesser population shifts into account. The decision made by the last but one Parliament was to have more frequent boundary reviews that individually would be less disruptive. Of course, the first one—particularly if moving from 650 Members to 600, and if there has not been one for 20 years—is clearly disruptive, but once that has taken place, subsequent reviews will be less disruptive. There is much to recommend in that approach.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: I took a lengthy intervention from the hon. Gentleman, so I will make a little progress.

The issue of the so-called missing voters was raised by the hon. Member for Walsall South and in a couple of interventions, including from the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith). Matt Singh from Number Cruncher Politics has done a significant piece of work on this, which was also validated by the Library. There would be an issue if the distribution of new voters who are not on the register used for the current boundary review was significantly different across the country. However, analysis shows that the distribution of new voters on the electoral roll is broadly consistent with the distribution of those on the existing registers. In other words, although the absolute number of voters is different, those voters are not significantly differently distributed across the country, which means that they will not make a material difference to the distribution of constituencies.

It is worth pointing out that we have to carry out a review and draw a line somewhere, and that as soon as we start a review, it will effectively be out of date. The Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton refers to the register for the 2017 general election. That is already out of date because there has been another one. If we take his logic, we will never have a boundary review, because every time we start, a new register arrives and is out of date.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the new legislation to which he referred made it far more difficult for young people to register? That legislation was passed under a coalition Government. One party in that coalition supported an increase in tuition fees having promised that there would be no fees, and the other party knew that its support among young people was minimal to say the least.

Mr Harper: I do not agree with that at all. I would argue that the individual electoral registration system that we introduced, which addressed the accuracy and completeness of the register, as well as the fact that we enabled online registration made it much easier for people to register to vote. The vast majority of people who register now do so online, using a very straightforward piece of software that is particularly attractive to younger people. Before each of the last significant electoral events—the European Union referendum and the 2017 general election—significant numbers of people, particularly young people, seemed to have no trouble registering to vote.

I am mindful of your injunction, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given that I have taken a number of interventions, let me make my final argument for why the House should reject the motion and what we should do instead. The right way to proceed would be to allow the boundary commissioners to report. The Leader of the House could then consider those reports, bring forward Orders in Council and allow the House to take a decision. If the House decides to accept the Orders in Council, we are done. The boundary review will have been accepted, we will have new boundaries and the problem will be sorted out.

If, for some reason, the House chooses not to do that, there will be a debate about those Orders in Council and the Leader of the House will be able to reflect on that debate. If the Government decide to table a money resolution, we can then consider the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton in the light of that debate, but with one significant change. This is a constitutional measure. When the original legislation was taken through Parliament, it was considered in Committee on the Floor of the House, rather than by a Bill Committee upstairs, meaning that every Member from every part of the United Kingdom could take part.

We should allow such a debate to take place. If the House does not support the boundary reviews and decides that it wants a money resolution and to proceed with the Bill, it should be considered on the Floor of the House so that every Member can contribute, rather than in Public Bill Committee. That is why we should wait. We should look at the results of the boundary
review and allow the Government to reflect on the debate that will take place, and if the House chooses not to adopt the proposals, we can then proceed on a more sensible basis. That is why it makes sense to follow the Leader of the House’s arguments, to reject the motion, and to allow the House to consider the boundary commissions’ reports in the usual way.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before I call the next speaker, let me be clear. When I said everybody could take nine minutes, that does include interventions. Otherwise, I will have to impose a time limit.

5.24 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We can all agree that boundary changes are needed. Our current boundaries are based on an electoral register that is 18 years old. There is, however, a question as to how we go about it. We have a boundary review going on at the moment, which is due to report to Parliament in September. The 2017 election gave us a minority Government who have spent the past year hobbling from week to week trying to keep themselves together. This weak Government do not have the support to win a vote in the autumn and push through controversial constitutional changes. The Tory-dominated Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee said as much in its recent report. It concluded that the Government “cannot be confident” that the House of Commons will support the implementation of the Boundary Commission’s proposals when they come before us in the autumn.

The question we are faced with now is this: do we let the Government continue in their delusion that if they put off addressing the issue until the autumn the enormous opposition to the current review will magically melt away, or do we deal with reality and put in place a realistic cross-party compromise that delivers new boundaries before the next election? My private Member’s Bill is a serious attempt at the second option, but it has been frustrated by the Government’s procedural manoeuvrings.

My Bill does three major things. First, it retains the 650 MPs we have at the moment. Secondly, it provides for boundary reviews every 10 years. Thirdly, it ensures that the 2 million people who have registered to vote since 2015 have their voices heard in the boundary review. The referendum and 2017 general election saw huge surges in voter participation, primarily among young people. I am passionate that they should be represented in the boundaries that will shape the result of future elections, but the Government are not interested in encouraging participation in our democracy. Recent voter ID pilots disenfranchised legitimate voters, many of whom already faced barriers to democratic engagement. All the while, the Government have been padding out the unelected House of Lords to avoid defeat on proposed Brexit legislation.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his Bill. I think it does have some good points. First, on voter ID, in my Woking constituency the turnout actually increased and we had very strict voter ID in place. Secondly, I would like to ask him a question. During all the years the Labour party was in power over the past 40 or 50 years, was there any occasion when it supported a private Member’s Bill on a constitutional or parliamentary boundary issue from a Member of the main Opposition, or, if it passed Second Reading, gave it a money resolution? Any Bill at all over the past 50 years?

Afzal Khan: I am not sure how relevant that is to this discussion, but I am a new Member and I do not know the whole history.

The Government are happy to increase the size of the unelected Chamber, at greater cost to the public purse, while cutting the elected side and discouraging participation in what goes on here.

On the money resolution, many people are put off getting involved in politics and Parliament because it is so difficult to understand what goes on here. The private Members’ Bill process is arguably the worst culprit. The process is clearly broken. The public were rightly outraged by how easily the upskirting Bill was blocked last week, even when it had the support of the Government. Similarly outrageous is how easily the Government can block a private Member’s Bill, even when it commands overwhelming cross-party support. Today marks 200 days since my Bill passed its Second Reading unanimously. Our Committee has so far met five times. We have had discussions about money resolutions, the financial sovereignty of the Crown, “Erskine May” and the Bishop of Chester, but we have not yet discussed a single line of the Bill.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the difficulty of getting private Members’ Bills through. I will have a private Member’s Bill on 23 November—it is No. 21 of 23, with the House set to sit for only five and a half hours. There is absolutely no chance of the Bill being debated and we will then be in a situation where it has to come back another time. Is one of the solutions to have more sitting Fridays for private Members’ Bills to allow more time for them to become law?

Afzal Khan: I would be quite happy if the House decided to have more Friday sittings.

I never expected to become an expert in such a narrow aspect of parliamentary procedure, but unfortunately I have spent the last few months reading up on money resolutions, rather than working towards a compromise on boundaries. I have learned that there is a clear parliamentary convention that the Government bring a money resolution after Second Reading of a private member’s Bill. In 2015, a Government Minister reaffirmed this, saying 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”.—[Official Report, 3 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 926.]

Since their devastating failure at the general election, the Government have gone against their words. Despite money resolutions having been tabled for many Bills further behind in the queue, none has been forthcoming for this Bill. Too weak to defeat my Bill on a vote, the Government are hiding behind procedure. With complete
disregard for democracy, this minority Government are abusing their Executive power to defy the will of the House. We have had business questions, points of order, an urgent question and an emergency debate on this already. These have surprised even me by the extent of cross-party agreement. Opposition parties were united in calling on the Government to table a money resolution. Conservative Back Benchers were lining up to condemn their own Ministers.

It is a shame that we have been pushed to table this motion today. It would be much better for the Government to respect procedure, the will of the House and the will of their party, and bring forward a money resolution, but, given the Government’s continued refusal, we have been forced into this position. The Government’s time is up; we must make progress on this important Bill. To honour the conventions of the House and the will of Parliament, Members must support this motion.

5.32 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I find myself in an unusual position today, because it is a matter of record that I very much support the aims of this private Member’s Bill, but I am very concerned that the motion before the House sets a dangerous precedent that undermines the role of the Government and the Executive. We have heard a lot today about the respective roles of Parliament and the Executive, and it is very important that we understand and uphold the convention of that separation of powers and that those roles are understood and maintained. I may return to that point in a minute.

I do not believe that now is the right time to be cutting 50 Members of this House. I understand the reasons why the coalition Government made that decision. At the time, I was not a Member and I did not think that it was the right thing to do, but I understood why the decision was made. However, the fact is that the world has changed since that Bill was passed. We are leaving the EU. We will be losing 73 Members of the European Parliament and all their work—I understand that we could have a debate about how much work MEPs actually do—will be coming to this place. Therefore, I do not believe that it is a sensible move to reduce the democratic representation in this House by cutting the number of MPs. That is my position.

If we want to cut the size of Parliament, let us start by cutting the number of Members of the upper Chamber. That is where I would begin.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend’s arguments, but I also think my right hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Afzal Khan) to consider a protection for Cornwall like that provided for Northern Ireland, so that the six Cornish seats might be protected and maintained in recognition of the minority status the Cornish now enjoy.

Bill proceeds, I would ask the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) to consider a protection for Cornwall like that provided for Northern Ireland, so that the six Cornish seats might be protected and maintained in recognition of the minority status the Cornish now enjoy.

5.32 pm

Steve Double: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Gentleman has my full sympathy when he talks about constituencies crossing boundaries. It might sound like a joke to Members, but the fact that the new constituency boundaries would cross over from east Hull into west Hull is felt very deeply by people in my area. There is a strong and long-standing division between the east and the west, yet the new boundaries would take a lump out of west Hull and add it to east Hull. The proposals do not respect the traditional areas.

Steve Double: I would not dare to comment on the sensitivities of Hull, but the hon. Lady has made her point very well.

As I said earlier, we have today discussed the role of the Executive in Parliament, but fundamentally it is the responsibility of Parliament to decide how many Members there should be. It would be wrong for the Executive to try to force through a cut when the new number does not enjoy the support of a majority in the House. It would be undemocratic. I accept the point that a Bill was passed in a previous Parliament to cut the number, but that should not be imposed on the House in the current circumstances. I ask the Government to consider allowing Members a free vote when the boundary proposals are brought before the House, so that we can express our views free from the Whips and look to our consciences in deciding whether this is right for our nation. It would be the right thing for the Government to do.
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that his point about Cornwall is shared in Wales, where the proposal is to reduce the number of seats from 40 to 29, which arguably would shift power from Westminster to Cardiff and so have significant consequences for devolution. The situation in Wales is similar to that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). Under the new proposals, there are seats where people cannot get from one end of the constituency to the other without driving through two others on route. Does he accept that this is not a desirable proposition?

Steve Double: The boundary proposals throw up many anomalies in various parts of the country, which, in my view, are very unhelpful and, in certain cases, unacceptable. That is why I think that it would be right to reconsider the proposals.

I will not support the motion, because I believe that it is the wrong way to address this issue. Although I support the Bill, I believe that passing the motion would undermine the Government’s role, for all the reasons that have already been given today. I am content to wait, as the Government propose, to allow the new boundaries to be discussed in the House and for us then to take a view.

If there is a majority in favour of the boundaries, so be it—I will have to accept that—but my hunch is that there will not be. If the House accordingly rejects them, one way to deal with that is to pass the money resolution, and we can then consider the Bill on that basis. I would prefer us not to have to go through all that, but I accept that the right way for the House to address the issue is to allow matters to take their course on that basis. Let us see what people’s views are at the time, and then decide how to proceed. If the private Member’s Bill does make progress, however, it will have my wholehearted support.

5.41 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Before addressing the specifics of the motion, let me make a general point. I have no problem at all with the argument that constituencies should be of equal size. My concern relates far more to the fact that the Government are proposing that we reduce the number from 650 to 600, which is a completely arbitrary figure pulled, essentially, out of thin air.

Let us get one thing straight. The Government’s arguments for that reduction are completely spurious. They talk about the cost of politics, but we are already set to lose 73 Members of the European Parliament, which will deprive the public of the representation that they provide; and, of course, they are more than happy to continue stuffing the House of Lords to the brim. The whole process is, in essence, a bare-faced gerrymander.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend observed that there has been absolutely no word from the Government that they intend to cut the number of Ministers? What they are actually doing is proportionately increasing the size of the Executive as well.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is clearly psychic, because that is precisely the point that I was about to make. The ratio between Front-Bench and Back-Bench MPs is, in terms of balance, vital to the way in which our democracy works. Back Benchers play a critical role in holding the Government to account. The fewer of them we have, in whichever party happens to be in power, the fewer are able to fulfil their public duty, and that will reduce, critically, the amount of scrutiny that is given to vitally important issues. Arguably the most important issue that our country has faced since the second world war is coming towards us, so the House will have an increased workload, and the role of Back Benchers in holding the Executive to account will become even more important. Workloads will increase for not only for Westminster, but for Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast.

There is also a compelling constituency reason to undermine the argument for reducing the number from 650 to 600. There is real concern about the impact of the reduction on the social and cultural dynamics of each constituency. It is crucial for MPs to represent areas with natural communities and shared interests.

Emma Hardy: I made a point earlier about Hull East and Hull West. There is also a proud fishing tradition among the Hessle Road community in Hull, which goes back for years. The new boundary will divide that community—a community that has existed for hundreds of years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be looked at again?

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Some absurd things are being thrown up by this review. For example, in my constituency the proposal was to have a boundary line which separated the shopping centre from the high street. It is utterly absurd and ludicrous.

The fact is that wherever we draw the line on a map when driven by a rigid mathematical equation we carve up communities, force unnatural alliances and throw communities together in ways that do not make sense and that end up deeply alienating the people we are elected to represent.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify these critical issues that affect communities all over the country, as Members on both sides of the House have done, but does he not agree that this is precisely why the Boundary Commission is doing its work, during which he and all of us, and members of the public, have had the opportunity to put forward precisely such views, which the commission will consider and then produce proposals?

Stephen Kinnock: The fundamental problem with the logic of the hon. Lady’s argument is that this is about the terms of reference that the commission was given: it was given terms of reference based on 600 and on a very narrow quota of 5%. Based on that, the Boundary Commission had its hands tied and inevitably was going to end up with some of the completely absurd proposals we have seen.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend also agree with the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament, which said that the changes every five years will mean there is great disruption for communities meaning that they never settle down? It will
also cost the Exchequer more because there is a five-year rotation. The Bill's proposal would change that to 10 years, provide safety and security for communities to build, and save the Exchequer money.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree with my hon. Friend. It provides that stability and continuity and also, given the 7.5% quota, the changes would not be that radical even on a 10-year basis, so it is an incremental change.

Why are the Government ploughing ahead? The bottom line is that the entire boundary review process has been a bare-faced gerrymander, and that is combined with the use of procedural devices and backstairs manoeuvring to block the will of the House. That is further evidence of the Government's willingness to abuse the power vested in the them. The Procedure Committee's 2013 report concluded:

"Government policy is not to refuse a money or ways and means resolution to a bill which has passed second reading."

The view of the Procedure Committee must be paramount in this case.

The Government clearly have no respect for this House or our democracy more widely: first, there was their £1 billion bribe to the Democratic Unionist party and now there is this. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who unfortunately is not in his place now, is therefore absolutely right to push the Government to do right by our democracy and to bring forward his Bill.

It is essential that 2.1 million new voters are heard. It is essential that my constituents and many of the constituents across this House are fairly and properly represented. And it is essential that this Government are prevented from riding roughshod over our democracy.

5.48 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), although I will be taking issue with some of the more lurid assertions he made in his speech.

I recognise the importance of this issue. I started my political career canvassing in 2009-10 and I vividly remember the expenses scandal and the anger of our constituents and voters on the doorstep. I remember, too, the calls at that time to reform this House and to look at some of these very important issues. It is therefore right that the Government at that time kicked off this process: they appointed the Boundary Commission and set about this important work as part of the wider work to reform politics and cut the cost of politics and bring transparency and decency back into this place. However, I have trouble with, and cannot agree with, some of the arguments that have been advanced in today's debate. The debate seems to be based on a suggestion that the Boundary Commission's original terms of reference were flawed—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: They were.

Rachel Maclean: We have heard that a few times. Of course, I was not here at that time, but in my opinion, the arguments that have been brought forward today do not stack up. Did someone want to intervene on me?

Sir Desmond Swayne: I'll have a go! The issue before us is that private Members' Bills are determined by a queue which is the result of a ballot. The Government are accused of manipulating the queue by withholding money resolutions. Interestingly, what happened last Friday was an attempt by the Government to manipulate the queue by taking a Bill that was No. 8 and getting it to a Second Reading on the nod, and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has attracted universal opprobrium for preventing that. That is the irony.

Rachel Maclean: Well, I think “Follow that if you dare” is an apposite comment. I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will proceed with my remarks.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is not in his place at the moment, but he is an honourable man and I respect his campaign on this issue. Of course he has garnered a lot of sympathy across the House. We have heard about the issues that our constituents have with boundaries, and they are valid concerns. It is right that we should be airing them in this House. However, the assertion seems to be that this private Member's Bill is the best way of dealing with those issues, and I do not agree with that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Lady says that she does not understand the flaws of the previous Bill. The only way to correct the flaws of a previous Bill is to bring forward an alternative Bill. Surely, taking figures not from an election but from a lull period in the electoral register, reducing the number of seats and not allowing the Boundary Commission to take into account census figures, demographics, community boundaries and county boundaries are all reasons why—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Interventions need to be brief. There are plenty of people waiting to speak, and it is not fair if interventions are too long.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is not that I do not understand; it is that I do not agree. Those are two different things.

We have here an assertion that a private Member's Bill, which was debated on a Friday, can better reflect this very serious issue than the Boundary Commission itself. The Boundary Commission has carried out thousands of hours of investigation and heard submissions from members of the public up and down the country. It has given all our constituents an opportunity to have an input on these important issues. That is the way to do democracy, and that is the way to deal with this important issue.

Steve Double: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and she is making some very good points. On that last point, the overwhelming majority of the thousands of people in Cornwall who submitted representations to the Boundary Commission do not want a cross-border seat. However, the legislation as it stands does not allow for there not to be such a seat; there has to be one. The views of local people cannot be taken into consideration because the legislation does not allow it.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would not dare to comment on the sensitivities of Cornwall and Devon, but I am sure that
[Rachel Maclean]

his comments have been heard and that they are very valid. He made some good suggestions in his speech about how to proceed—or possibly it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). There have been some very good suggestions from people who are much more expert on this topic than me, and I think we should go further with those.

I would like to address the point about the lack of an ability for voters to register. That argument seems to have been used several times to suggest that we should stop the Boundary Commission’s work or that it is flawed, but this issue is always going to exist. However, we have recently seen some excellent work by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who has brought forward a number of successful initiatives. Government money has been committed in order to get more voters on to the register, with hugely successful results. Surely this is the right way to tackle this issue. We need to look carefully at what is preventing voters from registering, and to make it easier for them. It is now possible to register online, for example, and I welcome that.

The work is bearing fruit, and it is the way to tackle the issue, rather than bringing forward private Members’ Bills to undermine something that has been going through Parliament for some considerable time. It seems that we are tying ourselves up in knots. My constituents would be surprised to hear that the Government are accused of gerrymandering or trying to undermine democracy when they have seen, week after week, attempts by Opposition Members to undermine Brexit—the biggest democratic expression of will that this country has ever seen.

I reject the assertion that has been levelled at the Government and the Conservative Members. Democracy needs to work through this process. Members have made many sensible suggestions as to how sensible concerns can be taken on board, but if we allowed today’s motion to pass, that would be an abuse of process and would set a dangerous precedent that I do not support. I will therefore not be voting for the motion today.

5.55 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) says, but I do not agree with her. However, I do agree with the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). The problem is that the House needs an early indication from the Government of what they propose to do with the boundary review’s proposal, as laid by the Government, to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600.

I know that enough Conservatives feel unhappy with what the proposal implies. It was always going to be controversial, notwithstanding the fact that the Government thought that they had the majority of the House behind them. My contribution will be short, because I just want the Government to test the will of the House to see whether they have the support to reduce the number of MPs to 600. I do not believe that they have that support. It would be much better to clear that matter out of the way and avoid the boundary commissions ending up in a stramash, with them feeling that they have wasted a lot of time in trying to take forward something that is unacceptable to the House. I hope that they will be able to start again and carry out a process that they would find a lot easier without being under the imprimatur of having to reduce the number of MPs by a ridiculous amount.

The boundary review could not achieve the 600 figure without doing things to my seat and to that of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay whereby we would end up with something that is fundamentally flawed. The House has always understood that the constituencies are based on not just number, but location.

Steve Double rose—

Dr Drew: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who may help me.

Steve Double: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s comments. I used to feel very much like him, but does he agree that we are now so close to the boundary commissions’ reports—only four sitting weeks—that we as may well wait? Voting on the commissions’ submissions will be the test that he talks about.

Dr Drew: That might well be true but, to be fair, the boundary commissions must to some extent try to pre-empt things and read into what has happened in successive debates and discussions—not necessarily just in the Chamber, but as result of what has happened in the Chamber. We should have an early vote and clear away some of the unnecessary disagreement.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, this is entirely based on the idea that we can just chop 50 people out of this House without making a difference, but that is fundamentally flawed. This is either gerrymandering for party political advantage or it is just about cost saving. As I said on Monday, the easiest way to save costs would be to get rid of the other place. That might be controversial, but it would be more democratically acceptable to many of our constituents who feel that this primary Chamber should be protected. Some of our constituents will unfairly end up in a constituency that they do not know, despite coming from one in which they had at least some idea of what the location meant, with the knowledge of who their MP was and that they could feel some confidence in them.

Let us get on with it and have an early vote, let us dump the notion that we can just chop 50 MPs, and let us go back to 650 MPs. We can then move forward. Whether we do that through the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) or some other device, let us do it. That is the fair approach, and I think it is what the vast majority of our constituents want.

I hope that the Government will take notice and that we can have a clear system in which we stick to 650 MPs, with constituency boundaries that mean something, rather than what we would end up with if we went to 600 MPs. I think that everyone would be largely satisfied with that.

6 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure to take part in the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He said that he agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). If he
follows my hon. Friend’s arguments exactly, he will be voting with the Government in the Lobby, so I look forward to seeing whether he agrees or not.

I have taken a keen interest in private Members’ Bills in my short time in the House. Some have accused me of taking a rather curious interest, but I blame my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), neither of whom is able to speak in the debate because of their other duties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills promoted the NHS (Charitable Trusts Etc) Act 2016—Peter Pan and Wendy’s Bill—which was the first private Member’s Bill in which I participated on a Friday. I have successfully taken a presentation Bill, the Road Traffic Offenders (Surrender of Driving Licences Etc) Bill, through Second Reading and Committee, only for it to be objected to on Third Reading. Yes, there was a lone voice of objection, but it was not the voice of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope); it was another Member. I will return to that procedure in due course.

I entirely understand the passion of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and his concern for piloting his Bill through this place. Taking legislation through the House is a difficult and treacherous business, and perhaps it should be, because surely it should not be easy to place legislation on the statute book. The one consolation of losing my private Member’s Bill was that it would not have succeeded in any event, because a general election got in the way, although of course that is rather cold comfort.

The motion does not touch on the merits of the boundary changes, but it is important that I express my view, as other hon. Members have done, because it seems beyond argument that there should be an equalisation of the number of constituents in each constituency. Doubtless there will be exceptions from the south to the north, and both my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) would argue passionately for why their constituency should be of a different size.

At the moment, for example, we have Arfon, a constituency of about 41,000, whereas North West Cambridgeshire has more than 93,000 electors. I have an electorate of 65,000, and also in my county is the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), which has an electorate of over 82,000. My other hon. Friend in Dorset has electorates ranging between 72,000 and 75,000. They may well think that I have an easy time of it and am slightly less busy than they are. I, of course, would argue that that is not the case, but there is a point about reorganising the boundaries to equalise the electorates.

Dorset, not unlike Cornwall and other areas, presents challenges. On the current iteration of the proposals, there will be a cross-county seat and we will lose a Member of Parliament. Be that as it may, I firmly believe that reorganisation and the equalisation of constituencies is beyond argument.

I have a novel point to make, which is not always possible for the last Government Back Bencher to speak. G. K. Chesterton is not quoted often enough in this place, and I think that I have time to read out the full principle of Chesterton’s fence—the principle that reforms should not be made until the reasoning behind the existing state of affairs is properly understood. I will quote this section in full:

“There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, ‘I don’t see the use of this; let us clear it away.’ To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: ‘If you don’t see the use of it...Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.’”

We would be well advised to take advice from that principle in this case, in two respects. The first is in relation to private Members’ Bills when one Member objects; the second is in relation to the financial privilege afforded to the Government of the day.

I was bitterly disappointed, of course, when my Bill was objected to by just one Member—I repeat that it was not my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. When that procedure was raised in a point of order by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), Mr Speaker rightly noted that a single voice objecting to a Bill does not count just on a Friday. He said:

“I should point out, in fairness and for accuracy, so that no one is misled, that the rule about a single objection applies similarly to any other business before the House after the moment of interruption.

—[Official Report, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 50.]”

He then referred to Standing Order No. 9(6).

Before we look at procedures and say, “Let’s just get rid of that,” we should first look at what their purpose is, and then at whether they serve that purpose and, if not, how we should reform them. On reform, the second area to which all this applies is the financial privilege afforded to the Government of the day, whereby there is a clear constitutional right to initiate financial resolutions. That is my novel point: Chesterton’s fence, which should be spoken about more often. Perhaps Chesterton should also be quoted more widely in such debates.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend’s point about objections relates to my point about the proper consideration of the Bill. One reason why we should not accept the motion is because this is a constitutional matter. If we were to proceed with the Bill’s Committee stage, that should be done not upstairs, where only a relatively small number of Members are able to participate, but on the Floor of the House. However, that should not happen until we have had chance to consider the boundary review proposals.

Michael Tomlinson: As so often, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. What he says is right, and it links to my initial point that it should not be easy for us to make laws in this place—there should be challenge and full debate, both on Second Reading and in Committee.

We should look forward to the Boundary Commission bringing back its proposals. My right hon. Friend made another astute point when he said that that is only four and a half months. We can wait that long for the commission to bring back its proposals so that they can be introduced and debated in this place. Let us then see what the consequences of that are. It would be rash and foolish—it is too soon—to support the motion today, and I will not be doing so.

6.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), who recited G. K. Chesterton
that is a new one and I might try it tomorrow in the Public Bill Committee. I have the distinct pleasure of leading on this Bill for the Scottish National party. Although I am thoroughly enjoying our standing engagement to meet on a Wednesday morning to discuss a motion to adjourn, I really think it would be better for the Committee to move on to discuss the substance of the Bill brought forward by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan).

The House will recall that this Bill was given a Second Reading, unanimously, on 1 December 2017, after the Government’s attempts to defeat the closure motion were voted down by 229 votes to 44. Hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, will talk about how we have to wait only four sitting weeks, but they do not mention that this Bill passed its Second Reading last year. Frustratingly, it then took some 159 days to establish the Bill Committee, which has met on five or six occasions now. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the job of the Bill Committee is to scrutinise the proposed legislation clause by clause, line by line and, if necessary, to scrutinise any competent amendments.

As I set out on 1 December last year, the SNP broadly supports this Bill. However, it is not a perfect Bill and I am seeking to amend it in one specific regard. We certainly welcome the relaxation of requirements so that the electorate per constituency has to be to within 7.5% of the electoral quota to preserve local representation. However, I am concerned that the Bill contains a provision in clause 1 for a fixed number of MPs for Northern Ireland but not for Scotland. I shall certainly seek to table amendments to that effect in Committee but, of course, I am currently prohibited from doing so because the Government have not granted a money resolution. That is troubling, because when he gave evidence to the Procedure Committee in 2013, the then Leader of the House set out clearly in her speech, that the Government are not trying to kill the Bill? As far as we are waiting for it to fester. We all believe that Parliament is taking back control—that we are leaving the European Union and this is going to be a sovereign Parliament. On 1 December last year, Parliament gave the Bill its Second Reading and the House resolved that it should go into Committee. That is the issue. It is not for the Government to decide that they are just going to leave it there in some sort of political purgatory. That is the fundamental point.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I serve on the Procedure Committee with the hon. Gentleman and am always interested in what he has to say. He is making an interesting case, but is he against the idea of reducing the House’s size from 650 to 600 MPs? That is one of the two issues that really ought to be considered today.

David Linden: I fundamentally object to the number of MPs being cut from 650 to 600. My view is that we could cut 59 MPs from this Chamber by Scotland being independent, but until such a time as the people of Scotland vote for that in a democratic referendum, I believe that this House, which is taking back lots of powers from the European Union, should have MPs who are able to scrutinise the Government.

I am mindful that the terms of the motion do not allow for a rehash of last year’s Second Reading debate, and nor is it about the general principles of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. The motion before us seeks the leave of the House to permit the Bill Committee to move from parliamentary purgatory to legislative scrutiny. Arguably, the motion is perhaps not the sexiest that the House has ever considered, although perhaps I think it is: right hon. and hon. Members will see that it is largely procedural. I must confess that when I saw the motion on the Order Paper, my initial reaction was to lament how disappointing it is that rarely allocated Opposition slots are being taken up to unblock the logjam of Back-Bench Bills, but the reality is that the Government have caused this problem.

Now, more than ever, Westminster has become a place of limited democracy, as perhaps best exemplified by the utterly broken private Member’s Bill system. On a point of principle, I fundamentally disagree with the notion that the main way for Back-Bench MPs to introduce Bills is via a lottery or a ballot. I have more chance of winning a raffle at the Garrowhill Primary School fair than I do of being able to introduce a private Member’s Bill through the route available.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman could always do what I did and queue up for the chance to introduce a presentation Bill. He would then have the opportunity to get his own Bill on the statute, as well. Many Members from different parties have followed the procedure.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is right, but the presentation Bill that he queued to introduce under
Standing Order No. 57 was defeated—it was objected to—and so there was not actually a way to get it on the statute book.

I do not agree with some of the tactics deployed, when it suits them, by what some in this place have dubbed “the awkward squad”. Over the weekend, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) rightly found himself the centre of what I can only presume was much wanted public attention, after he objected to necessary English legislation introduced by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) that would stop perverts taking photos up ladies’ skirts. The hon. Member for Christchurch appears to have a long-standing, albeit selective, view that private Members’ Bills should not receive parliamentary approval. I must confess that I was somewhat surprised when the House considered the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). During exceptionally short proceedings, the hon. Member for Christchurch did not object to the money resolution that evening, and I see that the Bill, which was 92nd in the queue for this Session, has now reached Report stage.

Perversely, Bills that have passed Second Reading on sitting Fridays but do not have the support of the Government have been kicked into the parliamentary purgatory that is Public Bill Committees. Indeed, some have not even got that far. The UK Government have failed to heed calls for reforms of the private Member’s Bill process, and now they break their own conventions and ignore the will of Parliament. The Procedure Committee issued reports calling for major changes to the process in September 2013, March 2014, September 2015, April 2016 and October 2016. I certainly hope that the Procedure Committee will hold another inquiry very soon. Their changes have largely been ignored by the Government. They have noted that the procedures “disenfranchise Members who may wish to support a bill being promoted by a colleague and are misleading to the public and to the interest groups who seek to use it to advance legislative change”.

The problem is that this is a Government who are still acting as though they have a parliamentary majority. They do not appear to engage properly in Opposition day debates, and they certainly do not vote in the vast majority of them. If the House divides this evening, I will be very interested to see whether the Government take part. They have stuffed the Standing Committees of this House with a majority of their Members, even though they are a minority Government. They have done their level best to ensure that the Democratic Unionist party has been given £1 billion to ensure that some of their legislation gets through; and they have dealt with private Members’ Bills in a way that is exactly consistent with that approach.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman and I enjoy our sparring on Wednesday mornings, and I look forward to doing so again tomorrow. I have just a couple of points to make. First, the Democratic Unionist party has not been given a single penny. That money is for the people of Northern Ireland, and it is important to make that point. Secondly, the House decided the composition of Public Bill Committees, not the Government.

David Linden: We all remember the photographs of the former Government Chief Whip, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Democratic Unionist party. I don’t know; maybe it was a coincidence that it was announced that £1 billion was going to Northern Ireland on the same day that the confidence and supply agreement was signed. I am no expert.

The way in which the Government continue to deal with private Members’ Bills makes a mockery of this place. In essence, the Government are treating the House with sheer contempt. The Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill is, I am afraid, probably just the tip of the iceberg. The Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is also still awaiting a money resolution. Indeed, it has not even gone into Committee. His Bill has not even got to the pleasurable stage of meeting on a Wednesday morning to consider a motion to adjourn, yet my hon. Friend has cross-party support. I think that the reason why the Government are stonewalling that Bill is that, again, they realise that there is a majority for it in the House of Commons.

I am mindful of time, and I will close by saying that the Government are playing fast and loose with the procedures of this House. They might think they are being big and clever, but they must remember that one day—perhaps sooner rather than later—they will be on the Opposition Benches and they could be subject to the same type of behaviour. The Government risk setting a precedent that may just one day come back to bite them on the bottom.

6.18 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am not one of the awkward squad, I trust, in the Chamber today. I hope that I am a paragon of reasonableness, but today I really must protest because my constituency is the elephant in the room. It is one of the two largest constituencies in the United Kingdom. I have the honour to represent the counties of Caithness, Sutherland—a vast county—and part of Ross and Cromarty. It is a gargantuan, gigantic constituency. I would like to share some facts about it with the House.

The journey from Evanton in the south-east to John O’Groats is 103 miles; it takes me two hours and 21 minutes. It takes two hours and 49 minutes to drive the 115 miles from Lochinver in the south-west to Wick in the north-east. My constituency covers 3,675 square miles. To give hon. Members an idea of just how big that is—although I know that some already understand—we could fit all 73 London constituencies in my constituency, and have room left over around the sides.

Members might think that, although I am not in the awkward squad, I am mumping and moaning today. But I get about. I am young, fit and enthusiastic, but with the best will in the world, it is very hard to cover the communities within my constituency, even when driving hither and thither at maximum speed. The point is that constituencies and communities have a right of access to their elected Member. Despite doing what I hope is my best, if there is Member Development between me and the people of my constituency, I must consider what I can do in terms of reaching out, why would I not suggest that there is a slight democratic deficit?

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who is no longer in his place, said that the identification and identity of communities is colossally important. I can tell hon. Members that somebody speaking Gaelic in the west of my constituency and somebody...
living in Caithness not only do not speak the same language; the cultures are also very different indeed. It makes as much sense as putting Aberdeen city with Argyllshire. It just does not make sense.

The proposal of the Boundary Commission for Scotland would make my constituency even larger—massively larger. We can talk in this place until the cows come home about money resolutions and private Members’ Bill, but when an idea is stark raving bonkers, like this one, it just has to be said loud and clear. We have heard a quotation from G. K. Chesterton, so let me give the House a famous quotation by P. G. Wodehouse, who said:

“It is never difficult to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance and a ray of sunshine.”

Well, today I do have a bit of a grievance.

In closing, I take comfort from the words of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and others on both sides of the Chamber. I do hope that some sense can prevail. My constituents talk about many things, and one of them is the prospect of making my constituency even bigger. I may not hold the seat, as I may be voted out, but whoever represents the seat will have a very difficult time representing those good people if the constituency gets any bigger.

6.22 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It has been the honour of my life to represent the constituency in which I was born for the last 21 years. For all but a brief and unheralded period as a Whip, I have been a Back-Bench MP. I do not regard my job as second rate to any shadow Minister or Minister, as the role of constituency MP is a vital one in our democracy and political discourse. Everything that has happened over the past 20 years has made me feel that even more. Whether on Brexit, austerity and the huge effects of significant cuts in public expenditure that have fallen on the poorest in our constituencies, people who have had hard times finding work, people who cannot find homes or people who feel that the NHS is not meeting their needs, it is our job to represent those voices. Reducing the number of constituencies would make that job harder. It would make it more difficult to represent the voiceless and therefore to keep our political show on the road.

Under the first proposals from the Boundary Commission, my constituency of Mitcham and Morden was to be split across five different parliamentary constituencies. That is the fault not of the Boundary Commission, but of the rules that it was required to enforce. One fairly moderately sized London constituency was to be split between Streatham, Wimbledon, Tooting, Sutton and Cheam, and Carshalton and Wallington—a total of four different London boroughs. Whether I continue to be the MP for Mitcham and Morden or not is not the point. My constituency has deep and abiding ties that bind it, including hundreds of years of history in the parishes of Morden and Mitcham. People believe that they live in an area, that they are part of a community and that they know who to blame when things go wrong.

So why do it? Why reduce the number to 600? Why not 700? Why not 550? Why 600? People talk about equalisation. What do we mean by equalisation? We mean the numbers in the parliamentary constituency. But what about the people who live in my constituency, some 11,000 of them, who cannot vote in a parliamentary election but can vote in a local election? When somebody comes to my advice surgery, I—like, I am sure, all Members of this House—do not ask them, “Are you an EU citizen? Can you vote in a parliamentary election? Are you on the electoral register?” That is not my job. It is my job to represent my constituents, whatever their status, to the best of my ability.

Equalisation—what equalisation? What list, what community, and what factors? We know that young people are less likely to be registered than older people. We know that certain ethnic minorities are less likely to be registered. We know that private renters are less likely to be registered. We know all those things but we wish to exclude those people and have more of them living in some urban constituencies. Is a poor black boy not as entitled to be represented as an older woman from the home counties? Equalisation—what equalisation?

We hear about saving money. I have a suggestion: if we want to save public money, which is a perfectly laudable suggestion, why not introduce automatic electoral registration? Victoria state in Australia, with a population of 3.5 million, managed to get 95% accuracy on its register by employing five people. In my borough of Merton, there are currently 155,841 people on a register of some sort, and we employ more than five people to get that number of people on to it. So if we want to save money, we could get a better form of electoral registration.

But this is not about any of those things. It is not about representation. It is not about saving money. It is not about equalisation. It is about the profound effect of the American Republican party on the Conservative party. It is about issues of electoral registration, presenting ID at polling stations, gerrymandering boundaries and breaking up communities. I have had the absolute honour to fight for President Barack Obama, as candidate and President, in two elections. I have been to Ohio; I have been to Virginia; and I have seen where they deregister people, taking away their right to vote, and gerrymander their boundaries. That provokes anger and discontent, and people feel that they are not a part of legitimate society.

I urge one nation Conservatives to think about the impact of these reforms on our society at a time of great turbulence. Some things matter more than small issues of political expediency. This is about the way we run our democracy. The fact that our boundaries are determined by rules and not by party political preference is really important to us. We need to have a cold, hard look at what the impact of these boundary changes will be and what this says about us and our democracy.

6.28 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): We have heard today from G. K. Chesterton and P. G. Wodehouse, which is of course a pleasure. Nevertheless, it is a matter of regret that we have had to hold this debate because the Government should long ago have respected the wishes of this House and proceeded to move the necessary money resolution. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for persevering in holding the Government to account.

The Public Bill Committee, of which I am a member, has now had six sittings to try to scrutinise this important Bill, which passed its Second Reading in this Chamber
by 229 to 44 votes. However, we have been unable to consider a single clause because of the highly unusual step taken by the Government to refuse to table a money resolution.

Michael Tomlinson: I think it is in fact better than the hon. Gentleman stated, because those were the votes on the closure motion. I believe the House voted unanimously for the Bill’s Second Reading.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for correcting me, and he is absolutely right. This has not only become a routine drain on parliamentary time and resources for everyone involved, but is deeply disrespectful to Members across the House who sent a strong message to the Government last December that they wanted the Bill to be considered in Committee. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton that it is now 200 days since that vote took place. It is vital that we uphold parliamentary sovereignty, which is why I am pleading for all Members across the House to support the motion.

We are where we are, and I pay tribute to hon. Members for their participation in the debate. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)—or, dare I say it, West Gloucestershire?—talked about the fact that his constituency might become West Gloucestershire. Of course, he would also have to be adopted by the association to be the candidate, but I am sure that it would have no problem adopting him. He mentioned the 35,000 responses to the Boundary Commission’s review. I will hazard a guess that most of those responses were complaining about how daft the review was, based on the parameters set by the Government. I will say one thing about him: he has been an assiduous attender of the Bill Committee, even when only a motion to adjourn was moved, and I pay tribute to him for being one of the few Conservative Members who has taken that procedure seriously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, who is an old friend, told us that he has become an expert in parliamentary procedure. With that expertise, he reminded us that the convention is that the Government always table a money resolution on Second Reading.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) gave a brave speech and said that the circumstances in the world have changed. He talked about the motion setting a dangerous precedent, but I put it to him that the dangerous precedent is surely the Government ignoring the will of the House by ignoring the Second Reading vote.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) talked about her introduction to politics in 2009-10 and all the demands for parliamentary reform at that time. I suggest that those demands were for reform of the expenses system, which is what was causing all the difficulties around this place, not of parliamentary boundaries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) presented us with an easy solution to the problem: an early vote, so that the Government could test the will of the House on a reduction from 650 to 600 seats. He said that a reduction from 600 to 650 would save time and resources. He made the important point that we need to remember that we represent place as well as simply numbers.

Then we come to the G. K. Chesterton fan, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), who talked about the difficult and treacherous business of taking forward legislation. He is right that legislation should be difficult and should be tested, but if there is any treachery, dare I say it?—I hope I am not being unparliamentary—it might lie on the Government’s side of the House, with Ministers not respecting the will of the House on Second Reading.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) reflected on his experiences on the Procedure Committee and reminded us that money resolutions are always provided. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said that his constituency is 103 miles one way by 115 the other—as big as London—and that the new boundaries would make it even more impossible to manage.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who represents the constituency of her birth, talked about the history of those parishes providing a real sense of community. She reminded us that our role here is to represent the voiceless, and she spoke of the 11,000 residents of her constituency who are not on the register but nevertheless need representation. It has been an excellent debate.

Mr Goodwill: People not being on the electoral register is not just an urban issue. In constituencies such as mine, many people have second homes and are not on the electoral register. They vote in local elections in many cases, but they require help from their MP if they have problems concerning the local authority. It is not just in inner-city constituencies that there are more constituents than the number on the register.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Of course, someone who has a second home is perhaps registered elsewhere, but my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden was making a particular point about those who are not on any register but still require representation.

The Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton seeks to resolve a controversial 5% variation in the size of constituencies. As we all know, under the new rules outlined in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, all constituencies are required to have a quota between 95% and 100% of the national quota. The consequences of that rigid 5% threshold are that some communities will be split up, while others are merged and dragged into other communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) discussed that and spoke about the crazy effect on his high street, which would be split, with the shopping centre on one side and other shops on the other.

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee recommended that that constraint be relaxed to 10%—a proposal rejected by the then Government in 2015—so I welcome the flexibility that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has shown. He has listened to Conservative Members who believe that the 10% quota is too large, and he has taken their views into consideration. Relaxing the quota from 5% to 7.5% would mean that a majority of constituencies would not change at each election, which would strike the right balance and mean that each boundary review would be less disruptive.
[Christian Matheson]

The reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600 runs contrary to good sense in many ways. At a time when we are planning to leave the EU—hon. Members made this point—and supposedly return control to the UK, we need to maintain numbers in the House. All that the reduction in numbers would achieve is a reduction in the ability of Parliament to scrutinise the Government—another point made in the debate. At the same time, the Government have appointed more unelected peers to the other place than any other Government, so it is absurd that they should reduce numbers in the elected Chamber.

The Hansard Society did not find any rationale for the Government’s decision, noting that there was “real concern” that the number had been “plucked from thin air—600 simply being a neat number.” Cutting 50 MPs represents a crisis of scrutiny—a concern expressed by the Electoral Reform Society and by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon. Finally, it is vital that constituencies represent the communities that they serve.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There is no better example of that than my constituency and the number of people I represent. Thirteen thousand people registered to vote in the 2017 general election, increasing the size of the electorate by nearly 10,000. Under the Government’s proposals, that community would be decimated because of the arbitrary point about numbers. The Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) absolutely rectifies that and puts the registration date at the right point.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend gives an example of communities that are not reflected in parliamentary constituencies. My fear is that there are plenty of examples across the House, not simply in Leeds, where that would happen. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden and plenty of others that that link would be broken.

A major flaw with the boundary reviews is that they were based on the December 2013 electoral register. Since then, as we have heard, over 2 million people have been added to the electoral roll, following the increase in registration for the EU referendum and the 2017 general election. Some Government Members argue that the date for any boundary review is inevitably a snapshot. However, 2015 was not just any year. It was the year 600,000 people dropped off the electoral register after the Government’s decision to rush through the introduction of individual electoral registration, against the advice of the Electoral Commission.

Mr Harper: It is absolutely right that a significant number of entries were removed from the register, but the point was that many of them were not legitimate. Individual electoral registration was introduced to deal with accuracy and completeness. Having lots of people on the register who do not really exist is not a good thing—it is a bad thing—and it is good that we fixed it.

Christian Matheson: I have no doubt that electoral registers have to be cleaned up, but I cannot believe that there were 2 million people on the electoral register who simply did not exist. The right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) discussed people with second homes. I am on two electoral registers, as I have a place in London because of this job, but the numbers are few and far between, and I do not believe that 2 million have dropped off for any reason other than that when IER was introduced it made it more difficult to register.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden referred to Republican party tactics that I would describe as voter suppression. I am not suggesting this of the Government, but I would be concerned if those tactics found their way to this side of the Atlantic and it became harder for people to vote and take part in the democratic process.

Rachel Maclean: I feel that I need to put it on the record that I completely refute any assertion that I, as a Member of this House, have been influenced by the tactics of the Republican party on the other side of the Atlantic.

Christian Matheson: I consider that point to have been put on the record.

London lost almost 100,000 voters, despite experiencing a rise in population. However, the bigger issue—bigger than the details of the flawed boundary review—is the relationship between the Government and this House. This House gave the Bill a Second Reading with a hefty majority; indeed, it did so unanimously, as the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole reminded us. It should not be for the Government to ignore the wishes of the House, which were expressed so clearly on Second Reading. If we are taking back control, that control should reside in this House, not with the Executive. Running away from debate by using procedural chicanery gives a dreadful impression of the Government, so our proposal tonight is to allow the Bill to continue its detailed consideration in Committee.

I know that, like me, many hon. Members across the House cherish the status of this House and its sovereignty. They might not agree with the aims of the Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, but they will understand that it is wrong to block its passage by anything other than a vote in this House. For that reason, and to stand up for the primacy of the House of Commons, I invite all hon. Members to join me tonight in supporting the motion and allowing democracy to thrive—not to vote against the Government, but to vote for this House.

6.41 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is a pleasure to close this Opposition day debate. I welcome the contributions from hon. and right hon. Members from across the House. May I take this opportunity to welcome the new hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who I can see in her place? I hope she has enjoyed this afternoon’s debate, in the first of many weeks in which she will be participating in the House’s business. It is a pleasure to see her in her place. As a fellow by-election winner, I can sympathise with her, given her no doubt frenetic first week. I wish her every success in her work, as does the whole House.
We heard from the inimitable hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who gave us a tour of his views on many things and who likes to paint himself as a peacemaker. I for one in the Government would welcome that role from him. I look forward to spending many more pleasurable hours in his company, talking about, for example, the frameworks that we will put in place on our departure from the European Union and how they will add to the powers of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and a future Northern Ireland Assembly.

I also welcome the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who helpfully reminded the House that the debate on the order relating to the current boundary review is but four sitting weeks away. Like him, I think that that is a reasonable period to be able to anticipate.

I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who rightly spoke on his Bill. May I say what a pleasure it is to spend time with him and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) every Wednesday morning? We are endlessly entertained by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, who most recently did his best to list every single Member of the House of Lords. As you will know, Mr Speaker, it is not in order in any debate in this House simply to read out a list, so he was gently guided back towards a better form of debate.

We heard from the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who I cannot see in his place at this moment and from my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who reminded us that Cornwall and the issues of the Cornish must never be shared and must never be split asunder. Only a few nights ago, we had a debate I remember very clearly, relating to another part of my portfolio, on the representation of the Cornish national identity, which I look forward to reprising with him.

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Let me add to this list the comments of the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). He was extremely helpful in enlightening the House about the rule of G.K. Chesterton.

Let me add to this list the comments of the hon. Member for West Oxfordshire (Abdulah Al-Turki), who has already mentioned, and the hon. Member for Stone, who reminded us of what it means to fulfil constituency duties in a considerably larger geographical constituency than many of the rest of us. I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who put some issues on the record with passion. I admire and respect that passion, and I am glad she came here today to do that.

Let me address some of the issues raised in the debate before returning to the motion. A number of points were made about the procedures of the House for private Members’ Bills. I will not go into that in detail, because it is not my place to do so. It is a matter of procedure. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made a few remarks about that earlier on, but I think it is a matter for another day.

Remarks were made about reform of the House of Lords. The hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Stroud and I, with others, had a debate on this matter only yesterday in Westminster Hall—what a long time ago that already seems. In that debate, I had cause to remind Members, and I will do so again now, that the size of the House of Lords is smaller than when the current Prime Minister took office. To all those hon. Members who have said that the House of Lords has grown, I say in fact it has not; it has become smaller.

Afzal Khan: What is the Conservative party’s position in relation to the upper House? Why are you stuffing it with the unelected when you are trying to cut the elected?

Mr Speaker: I have not been stuffing the upper House for anybody. I am not doing that. The Government can answer for their own position, of course.

Chloe Smith: And nor are the Government. The key point, as I have just said, is that the other place is now smaller than when the Prime Minister took office. That is as a result of a policy of restraint, which she is showing in appointments, and of the Government policy, which the hon. Gentleman invites me to set out. I will take just a minute on it, Mr Speaker.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I am just in the middle of setting out the Government’s policy, which I have been asked to do.

We do not believe that reform of the House of Lords is the correct priority at this moment. There are many other things that the two Houses are being asked to consider. The House of Lords itself has set out a number of ways to reform without the need for primary legislation. We seek to support it in that.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. She talks about reform of the House of Lords and cutting the number of MPs in this House. The Bill received a Second Reading on Friday 1 December 2017. Since then, how many new Conservative peers have been put into the House of Lords?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman will remember from our debate only yesterday that the number of the most recent appointments made is 13. Let me repeat one more time, should it be needed, that the number of Lords has reduced since the Prime Minister came into office. In part, that is due to a culture and a new policy of retirement, which I welcome and which we did go into in some detail yesterday, so I will leave that there.

I want to respond to a couple of points that were made about the policy of individual electoral registration. I welcome the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) to his relatively new position on the Front Bench—it has already been very good to serve with him on Bill and statutory instrument Committees—but I am afraid that he is wrong in his remarks about IER. He spoke about a drop in the register that he thinks occurred after it was introduced. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean explained, what we saw after the introduction of IER was that both accuracy and completeness were maintained. The crucial point
is this: we expect the accuracy of the register to be able to be maintained at a higher level with the introduction of IER, because it encourages individuals to register themselves, individually—the clue is in the name. It is about accuracy.

The hon. Member for City of Chester conflated it with a second, separate issue, which is whether more have joined the register since. That is indeed the case. As the register currently stands, it is larger than it was in December 2015. That is a good thing. That is because our reforms to open up online registration, for example, and the occurrence of several major elections have encouraged many people to register. That is an unmitigated good thing. This Government are committed to helping more people to register to vote. That is what I stand for as the Minister responsible for electoral registration and other matters. I want to see it done with the security and integrity of the register foremost in mind. We have had debates in this place and elsewhere that suggest that the Labour party is not quite so committed to those principles. That is what we saw in some of the desperate slurs that have been made this afternoon. We have heard words such as “gerrymandering” and about the “manipulation” of the register from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood. I think that is outrageous. I said so early on in the debate and I say it again: it is an outrageous calumny to say that the Government are gerrymandering or trying to manipulate the register. I am not. The Government are not—does he think we are, really?

Mr Mahmood: Perry Barr, not Ladywood.

Chloe Smith: I stand corrected, and I thank the hon. Gentleman. Let me move on to the ways in which this debate has been important this afternoon and deal directly with the motion in front of us.

Jamie Stone: I thank the Minister for her gracious reference to me a few minutes ago. I point out in passing that the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and I are two exceedingly different people, and we would both be equally embarrassed to be confused. Does the Minister recognise my point that distance and geography have to be taken into consideration by the Boundary Commission for Scotland?

Chloe Smith: I stand corrected twice in a row on hon. Members’ constituency names—perhaps I need the help of the Boundary Commission to rearrange constituencies and thus learn them better. In all seriousness, I say to the hon. Gentleman that the Boundary Commissions are independent. This is crucially important, and he would not expect me in this debate to be able to prejudge their reviews, and nor would I try to do so. Although I respect the points that he came here today to make, it is not for me to answer the question that he just posed.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman makes a very sensible point about the geographical size of constituencies. That was indeed considered when we looked at the rules that the Boundary Commissions were set. I accept that he may not feel that there was sufficient flexibility, but there are rules that govern the maximum geographical size of constituencies, thus giving the Boundary Commissions some scope to reflect the issues that he raised in the House today.
tabling such a motion compromises the idea of the Opposition ever being a responsible Government. The Government are elected by the people and have the right and duty to initiate financial proceedings in the interests of the taxpayer.

As my right hon. Friend made absolutely clear at the start of the debate, the motion has nothing to do with the private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. I am sorry about that. I am sorry that he has come here today, as he does every Wednesday morning, to talk about a Bill for which the House has not granted him financial authority. I am sorry about that because he is a lovely man—we get on well on Wednesday mornings—and clearly has the support of his friends around him in the Chamber, but I am afraid that his party is letting him down with the motion on his friends around him in the Chamber, but I am afraid that his party is letting him down with the motion on the Order Paper tonight. They are suggesting a huge

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Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
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Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wisheart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

N O E S

Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Imran
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
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Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John

Bebb, Guto
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Benyon, rh Richard
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Davies, Glyn
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Ghan, Ms Nusrat
Gib, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
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
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollond, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leffroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,
That the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Cooperation and Information Sharing) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 607) laid before this House on 23 May be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(Rebecca Harris.)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 4 and 5 together.

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

That the draft Double Taxation Relief (Mauritius) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved.

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Cyprus) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 30 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief (Mauritius) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved.

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Cyprus) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 30 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

POLICE

That the draft Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (Codes of Practice) (Revision of Codes C, E, F, and H) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
Complex Regional Pain Syndrome

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

7.15 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to speak in my first Adjournment debate since being elected last year.

Complex regional pain syndrome—CRPS—is one of the most painful conditions known, registering a staggering 42 out of 50 on the McGill pain scale. That is worse than the pain of the amputation of a finger or toe with no anaesthetic, which registers as 40 out of 50, and it is worse than childbirth—the Minister may sympathise with me on that. CRPS is not a short-term pain that will heal in time. The most excruciating part is that the pain is long-term, and likely to be for life. In fact, CRPS is known as the world’s most painful incurable condition. In the United States, it is referred to as the “suicide disease” as it can lead sufferers to resort to suicide as the only means to escape the huge pain that they bear.

CRPS is a chronic neuropathic pain condition—a disease of the nervous system—and it usually starts with a minor injury or fracture to a limb. The major indicator is the huge amount of pain involved, which is out of all proportion with the original injury. The affected limb can swell, change colour and change in temperature and, instead of reducing in time, the pain just gets worse. It can lead to weakness of the limb, ulceration of the skin, wasting tissue and bone thinning. The pain caused by CRPS spreads over time and may even develop in the opposite limb or in other limbs. Patients with CRPS most likely live with anxiety and depression because of the amount of high-level pain they are in 24/7.

CRPS is not a well-known condition, although awareness of it is increasing thanks to the national charities that work hard to support sufferers and to promote the need for treatment. Six months ago, I was not aware of CRPS, so I want to pay tribute to my constituent Victoria Abbott-Fleming, whom I have met. Victoria qualified as a barrister, but six months after a minor accident at work, at the age of just 24, she received a diagnosis of CRPS. The symptoms included a burning, temperature and, instead of reducing in time, the pain out of all proportion with the original injury. The affecting limb can swell, change colour and change in temperature and, instead of reducing in time, the pain just gets worse. It can lead to weakness of the limb, ulceration of the skin, wasting tissue and bone thinning. The pain caused by CRPS spreads over time and may even develop in the opposite limb or in other limbs. Patients with CRPS most likely live with anxiety and depression because of the amount of high-level pain they are in 24/7.

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Ruth George: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I know that he has made inquiries and asked questions about CRPS over the years. All the sufferers thank every MP who raises the issue and helps them to feel that they have hope.

Apart from the physical and mental pain suffered due to CRPS, a severe part of the torture that my constituent Victoria experienced was the judgmental attitudes of medical professionals who did not understand or were not aware of the condition and the shame that she felt. She says, “The medical profession sometimes don’t believe your symptoms, or try to fob you off by saying, ‘Are you sure it is not in your head?’ or, ‘You look well. Are you sure you’re actually ill?’” Those problems are even worse now that we see children being diagnosed with CRPS, because children are often not believed when they say that they are in excruciating pain.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady brings up the point that CRPS is poorly understood, and that more understanding and awareness is needed from medical professionals.

After Victoria developed ulcers and total skin breakdown, she was told in 2006 that she needed to have her leg amputated above the knee at just 27 years old. Like many CRPS sufferers, she was unable to use a prosthetic limb because the prosthesis was too tight, pressing hard on the hypersensitive skin where she had had CRPS and inducing excruciating pain in her stump.

Victoria was left wheelchair-bound and unable to work as a barrister because many courts are completely inaccessible to wheelchair users, and because of her ongoing medication and her condition she was forced to leave her job. She pays tribute to her husband Michael, who saw her through the toughest of times and still supports her.
In 2014, Victoria received the even more devastating news that the condition had spread to her remaining leg, which she needed to have amputated. Amazingly, as a dual amputee, she has come through the experience and set up a national charity, Burning Nights, which offers support, understanding and explanation to CRPS sufferers. The charity offers a voice at the end of the phone, as well as very important advice when sufferers feel they cannot take any more.

The trouble is that we do not know how many people are living with CRPS. When I asked a parliamentary question, I was shocked to be told that the Department of Health and Social Care does not collect data on the number of people diagnosed with CRPS as it “is not classifiable within the ICD10 clinical coding”. That means that a box on an NHS computer cannot be ticked for CRPS. Various statistics have been suggested by the health profession and in the light of experience in other countries, but the most widely accepted figure is that there are about 26 people in 100,000 living with CRPS, which would equate to more than 15,000 sufferers in the UK. That means that CRPS does not even qualify as a rare disease but, as other hon. Members have said, many medical professionals have not even heard of it, let alone are aware of its symptoms and signs that would lead to diagnosis.

Too many patients are made to feel that they are making a fuss when they are actually in agony. That is not surprising, given that only 20 minutes during a medical degree concentrate on chronic pain—it is only 90 minutes for physios, who deal with people in pain all the time. Diagnosis takes an average of six months, but it may take even longer, especially for children, who are less likely to be believed when they are in severe pain. Once a diagnosis has occurred, it can take two years, or even three in some parts of the country, for a referral to a specialist pain clinic. I cannot imagine the pain of CRPS, let alone the added pain of knowing that nothing will be done to help for two or three years when every day, and especially every night, is agony—that does not bear thinking about.

Many treatments are effective only in the early stages of the disease, such as neuromodulation or DRG—dorsal root ganglion—treatment. Pain clinics usually offer medication and some physio for about six months, but sufferers are then usually discharged and told that there is nothing more that can be done. Unsurprisingly, they therefore may seek whatever they can, and in some cases that is amputation. I am afraid that private surgeons are offering amputations to people with CRPS at the knockdown price of £5,000 below the knee and £10,000 above it. People with CRPS are in such agony that they are prepared to undergo such an amputation because they think it may get rid of their pain. Unfortunately, as my constituent Victoria has told me, it does not, and often the pain does not go away. However, serious problems can arise when such amputations and major surgery are carried out by private surgeons. At the moment, the NHS picks up the bill for that. I very much hope that it will continue to do so, but this really makes the case that what we actually need is some hope, proper diagnosis and proper support, and a clinical pathway for people with CRPS that we will see them through not only their diagnosis, but long-term and lifelong treatment.

I have various proposals for the Minister, as I am sure she was expecting. They are based on the parliamentary questions I have been asking over the past few months. The first and perhaps most important is for her to put that tick-box on the NHS computer so that we can collect data for CRPS diagnoses. Without data on diagnoses, it is difficult to make a proper case for research and for the increased training and awareness of the medical profession that is needed.

In response to my parliamentary question about research, the Minister said:

“The NIHR is committed to maximising the potential impact of research that it funds for patients and the public. Applications to NIHR for research funding are subject to scientific peer review, with awards being made on the basis of value for money, scientific quality and the importance of the topic to patients and health and care services.”

Unless we know the numbers of patients who are suffering, however, it is impossible to decide whether an application for research is value for money.

My second request is on the protocols for diagnosis. Yes, we need to raise awareness among health professionals, as other Members have stated, but we also need to introduce protocols such as the one used at Liverpool’s fracture clinic. CRPS is common after a fracture, and at Liverpool the limb is checked after a plaster cast comes off if it looks unusual, or if unusual pain is reported. In that way, a diagnosis can be made early.

My third request is for an increase in the capacity of pain clinics. It is not acceptable that people have to wait an average of two years, and up to three years, to get the support that they so desperately need. That would probably help to address my fourth request, which is for mental health support for CRPS sufferers, with a 24-hour helpline—the pain is particularly excruciating at night—to help them to get through without feeling that they have to resort to amputation or even suicide.

My final request is for the Minister to meet my constituent, Victoria Abbott-Fleming. In spite of the difficulty involved in travelling with her condition, she has come down from Derbyshire to hear the debate. She has done so much to support and fight for other sufferers. CRPS is not a diagnosis that we would wish on anyone, and I hope that the Minister can offer some hope to its thousands of sufferers.

7.30 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate on such an incredibly important issue. She has articulated quite beautifully the hell that people suffering from complex regional pain syndrome go through. The only thing that I can even slightly identify with is the pain of childbirth, but even after that it is unimaginable for us to conceive of the sort of day-by-day endurance and the relentless pain that people suffer. It is a devastating condition and can lead to an overwhelming impact on sufferers and their families, so I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this subject to the House.

The potentially extreme nature of the condition and its symptoms, some of which the hon. Lady described—the excruciating pain, burning, swelling and skin discolouration—can be totally disruptive to everyday living and destroy a person’s quality of life. She spoke very movingly about her constituent Victoria Abbott-Fleming, whose story is incredibly upsetting. I very much forward to meeting Victoria and assuring her that I will do everything I can to move forward on the issues that the hon. Lady...
mentioned. In circumstances in which extreme decisions have to be considered, high-quality care and support can sometimes make a huge difference to someone’s experience of our health and care services.

I hope that, as I am sure the hon. Lady intended, this debate will help to raise awareness of this very debilitating and extremely painful condition. It has actually been recognised as a medical condition for around 150 years, but problems remain with the diagnosis of CRPS in its very earliest stages. Diagnosis involves excluding a lot of other more common conditions—such as infection or things like rheumatoid arthritis—that can have similar symptoms, and the causes remain largely unknown. Precipitating factors can include injury or surgery, but there is no relationship to the severity of trauma and the development of the pain. In some cases, there is no precipitating trauma at all. It is considered likely that because of the complex nature of the condition, there is absolutely no one single cause. That means that it is difficult to estimate how prevalent CRPS is, as many cases may not have been correctly diagnosed in the first instance.

To improve public awareness, the NHS Choices website provides comprehensive advice on the causes, symptoms and treatment of CRPS. In addition to that, various charities work in this area. The hon. Lady mentioned Burning Nights, which was set up by her incredibly brave constituent; if someone is in unimaginable pain, I can only imagine what a comfort it is for them to be able to speak to or hear from somebody who has experienced it themselves. The charities do great work to support not only the patients who have the condition but their families.

As the hon. Lady says, general practice is where patients with CRPS are most likely to be seen in the first instance. CRPS is a key part of the GP curriculum; it is identified as a key area of clinical knowledge in the Royal College of General Practitioners’ applied knowledge test content guide. The test is a key part of GPs’ qualifying exams, and it ensures that they have the knowledge needed to work as a GP in the NHS.

To improve identification and management of the condition, in 2013 the Royal College of Physicians published best practice guidance for clinicians on the diagnosis, referral and management of CRPS. This guidance was developed with the involvement and endorsement of 21 key organisations involved with the care of people with CRPS, including the Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Orthopaedic Association, the British Pain Society, the British Society for Rehabilitation Medicine and so on.

The guidance, as the hon. Lady says, recommends prompt diagnosis and early treatment. This is to avoid the secondary physical problems associated with disuse of an affected limb and the incredible psychological consequences of living with undiagnosed chronic pain. It has been shown that an early referral to physiotherapy, for example, and encouraging gentle movement as early as possible, may prevent progression of the symptoms. Patients with CRPS are generally best managed in specialist pain management clinics.

Ruth George: Will the Minister look at the proposal to set up protocols in fracture clinics and clinics where carpal tunnel surgery is performed? Prevalence of CRPS following such surgery or an injury is particularly pronounced.

Caroline Dinenage: I will certainly look at that.

The hon. Lady mentioned delays in referral to a pain clinic, which is something that concerns me. Waiting times should be about 13 weeks once a GP has referred someone, but, as she says, some people wait longer. NHS England commissions the highly specialised pain management services for adults and children, and we will raise the issue with it. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has also published guidance for the pharmacological management of neuropathic pain, which includes CRPS. The guidance was updated earlier this year to reflect the latest available evidence.

Patients with CRPS will usually be managed through routine access to primary or secondary care. For patients with the most chronic and intractable pain, a referral can be made to a highly specialised pain service, commissioned by NHS England. Here, patients can receive multidisciplinary expert care and specialised treatment. Once diagnosed, patients can expect access to a range of other healthcare professionals for support and on-going treatment. This includes physiotherapists, occupational therapists, neurologists, a psychologist to help with the associated psychological problems caused by living with CRPS, and other healthcare professionals trained in pain relief.

The hon. Lady spoke about research. The National Institute for Health Research welcomes research funding applications for any aspect of human health, including CRPS. The CRPS UK clinical and research network was established in 2006. It is a research collaboration between a number of UK NHS trusts and academic institutions with an interest in the disorder. Its primary aim is to raise awareness and understanding among health professionals, patients and the general public. This year it is 10 years since the network established the CRPS registry, which now holds over 500 records and contributions and has contributed to seven different national and international research studies.

I thank the hon. Lady again for bringing this important debate to the House. I have attempted to answer as many of her questions as I can, but I will come back to her with anything that I have not covered. I hope that the debate has been helpful in raising the profile of this very difficult and distressing condition.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU

1. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What recent discussions has she had with Northern Ireland political parties on the UK leaving the EU.

Karen Bradley: I have been clear, as have all Ministers in this Government, that we are committed to the Belfast agreement and its principles, including the principle of consent. I hope that the political leaders that the right hon. Gentleman referenced have also heard that message.

Nigel Dodds: The Secretary of State referenced the absence of devolution. Of course, one of the issues is the absence of funding for the Commonwealth youth games in 2021. Will she look carefully at what might be done to bring forward funding for this prestigious event? It should not be stopped as a result of Sinn Féin refusing to form a Government.

Karen Bradley: I met the Commonwealth Games Federation last week and I am aware of the concerns about this matter. I urge political leaders across Northern Ireland to make clear their support for the Commonwealth youth games in order that the Northern Ireland civil service can release the funds.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): There is already a border, which is a tax border, an excise border and, as my right hon. Friend will know very well, a security border. The Government have made some very sensible proposals that whatever the final arrangements are on the border, there should be more authorised economic operators. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with local parties in Northern Ireland and parties in the Republic of Ireland about extending the use of authorised economic operators?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend is very aware of and knowledgeable about the border, having been my predecessor in this role as Secretary of State. I can assure him that I have discussed with all political parties—both north and south of the border—the matter of the border and the practical ways in which we can overcome the problems that some people put forward as being an issue.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The EU has been instrumental in helping Northern Ireland to address its legacy issues and in promoting economic development. What are the Stormont parties—or, indeed, the Government—saying needs to be done to address the deficiencies there once the UK leaves the EU?

Karen Bradley: Many people bear credit for the developments that have happened since the signing of the Belfast agreement and the economic development of Northern Ireland. I say gently to the hon. Lady that perhaps the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom has more of a bearing on its economic strength than many other matters.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The technical note published on 7 June spoke of free trade agreements that could be entered into that would
not affect any temporary customs arrangements. What discussion has the Secretary of State had with the parties on specifically what form those free trade agreements might take and who they might involve?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is of course responsible for those free trade agreements. However, my hon. Friend alludes to the very important point that for Northern Ireland, leaving the European Union as part of the United Kingdom means that it will have access to those free trade arrangements with the rest of the world and a land border with the European Union. That puts Northern Ireland in a unique, privileged situation.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Brexit is the most fundamental issue that our generation faces. The voice of Scotland is heard through its Parliament and the voice of Wales through its Senedd; the voice of Stormont is silent. What urgent initiatives is the Secretary of State now going to take that will make a material difference in getting Stormont back to work?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right. In the absence of a functioning Executive, the normal processes—the Joint Ministerial Council meetings, for example—do not have Northern Ireland representation. I am working, together with my officials and Ministers in the Department, to ensure that all Northern Ireland parties are fully apprised of the situation. As he says, the important point is that if an Executive were in place, a full voice of Wales through its Senedd; the voice of Stormont is silent. What urgent initiatives is the Secretary of State now going to take that will make a material difference in getting Stormont back to work?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right: there are urgent decisions now piling up in Northern Ireland. Those decisions cannot be made by civil servants—the High Court has decreed that—and cannot be made by devolved Ministers because there are none. The case of Billy Caldwell is urgent enough for the Home Secretary to act here in England for the Secretary of State’s constituents and mine, so what will she now do to make sure that Billy is not an unwitting victim of this constitutional crisis?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right: there are a number of matters that are pressing. I have already referred to public appointments. I can also confirm that I will bring forward legislation before the summer recess to put the budget on a statutory footing for 2018-19.

The use of medicinal cannabis is of course a matter for the Home Office for the whole United Kingdom. That is why I welcome the decision by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to act here in England for the Secretary of State’s constituents and mine, so what will she now do to make sure that the case of Billy Caldwell was dealt with with suitable respect and dignity for the little boy.

Northern Ireland Economy

2. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the strength of the Northern Ireland economy.

Karen Bradley: We are delivering a fundamentally strong economy for Northern Ireland, with unemployment down to 3.3% from over 7% in 2010. Nearly 19,000 new jobs have been created over the last year, the highest number on record, meaning that more people have the security of a regular pay packet for themselves and their families.

Rachel Maclean: Redditch has a proud history of manufacturing businesses that trade with Northern Ireland. One such business is Trinitite, which manufactures specialist coatings for the defence and aerospace industries. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give to my constituents at Trinitite and other businesses that there is a prosperous global outlook after Brexit?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the opportunities for United Kingdom manufacturers—those in her constituency of Redditch and those based in Northern Ireland. The Trade Bill will enable the UK to continue with existing trading arrangements, and that will provide certainty, continuity and reassurance for businesses such as Trinitite.

Michelle Donelan: Companies such as Siemens in my constituency show an interest in and have an important stake in Northern Ireland. Has my right hon. Friend made any recent assessments of the economic impact of their remaining in the UK?

Karen Bradley: Northern Ireland benefits substantially from being part of the world’s fifth largest economy, with access to an internal UK market of about 65 million people—the most significant market for Northern Ireland businesses, worth £14.6 billion in sales and supporting thousands of jobs. This Government have built a strong economy that can invest in services such as the NHS and deliver public spending. On Monday, I visited Omagh to see the Strule shared education campus, which is benefiting from £140 million of funding from this Government.

Karen Bradley: The prospects and opportunities for Northern Ireland are absolutely fantastic. I am working to make sure that Northern Ireland benefits from all the opportunities that Brexit affords the United Kingdom.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): In welcoming the progress in the economy in Northern Ireland, does the Secretary of State realise that sport plays an important part in that? On Friday, the Commonwealth Games Federation will meet to decide whether Belfast will get the youth games. It is a small amount of money. Birmingham is
Karen Bradley: As I said to the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), I urge party leaders across Northern Ireland to make the views of the parties known, so that the civil service of Northern Ireland can make the right decision.

Karen Bradley: I have just referred to my visit on Monday to the Strule shared education campus in Omagh, which is benefiting from £140 million of UK Government funding—funding that is only available because this Government are delivering a strong economy.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): We know that the greatest roadblock to economic growth in Northern Ireland is the lack of an Assembly being in place. That economic difficulty is being created because no decisions can be made. What measures are the Department and the Secretary of State taking to allow that to happen, so that we can go forward?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will know that there is an appeal against the Buick judgment, which I think is what he was referring to. That appeal will be heard on Monday, and we await the outcome of it, but the Government stand ready to take whatever decisions are necessary.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The economy really will be damaged if planning decisions cannot be made. May I urge the Secretary of State to take swift action to ensure that planning decisions can be made by civil servants in the Executive if necessary?

Karen Bradley: I assure my right hon. Friend that we will take whatever steps are necessary in the light of the appeal that is due to be heard on Monday.

Leaving the EU: Border Policing

3. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the requirements for (a) physical and (b) electronic infrastructure to police the border after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shaiilsh Vara): Clause 43 of the December joint report makes it absolutely clear that there will be no physical infrastructure or related checks and controls on the border. As for the use of technology, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the details of a potential solution have yet to be worked out.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that the Government’s own assessment shows the economy being damaged by the Government’s plans and that the least worst option is staying in the customs union and the single market. Is that the case, or does he have alternative economic advice that he could publish?

Mr Vara: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s analysis. The fact is that the Northern Ireland economy is doing very well, with the lowest unemployment rate in the country, and exports are increasing. On the single market and the customs union, let me be absolutely clear: the people of the United Kingdom collectively voted to leave the EU, and that includes the customs union and the single market.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there would be no need for any kind of border infrastructure at all if the UK and the EU could agree what everybody wants, which is a comprehensive free trade agreement?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We need to have a comprehensive economic agreement with the European Union. That is possible, and I very much hope that all parties will work towards it.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): In recent discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland, was the issue of the European arrest warrant raised? Will the Secretary of State come to the House and make a statement on the serious implications for the Police Service of Northern Ireland if the availability of the European arrest warrant were closed down to the Chief Constable?

Mr Speaker: In relation to the border.

Lady Hermon indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. I am grateful for that nod from a sedentary position, which is very reassuring.

Mr Vara: I can assure the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke to the Chief Constable this morning about the European arrest warrant. We very much hope to have, as the Prime Minister has suggested, a UK-EU security treaty that will be all-embracing and bespoke. As the GCHQ director Jeremy Fleming said this morning, it is important to recognise that four European countries have benefited directly from our intelligence in the past year.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): With regard to the border, throughout Operation Banner and the troubles in Northern Ireland, the military and the police desperately tried to get a hard border between the north and south. We would blow up crossing points and the following morning they would be open again. With the automatic number plate recognition that we have now, there should be no hard border, and I cannot see how it could be possible.

Mr Vara: One of the dividends of the Belfast agreement is that we no longer have physical checks, along with security installations, at the border.
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What recent assessment has she made of the security situation in Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland, meaning an attack is highly likely. The Government provided the Police Service of Northern Ireland with £230 million between 2010 and 2016, and we are providing a further £160 million in this Parliament. Our response to terrorism and paramilitary activity is co-ordinated, effective and fully resourced.

Mr Jayawardena: I welcome what my right hon. Friend says, but how can it be right that loyal octogenarian veterans now have to look over their shoulders as a result of spurious and vexatious complaints in relation to allegations of which they have already been cleared? Is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our servicemen and women?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for his constituents on this matter. I am sure he will agree with me that the current mechanisms for investigating the past are not delivering either for victims or for veterans. Right now, too many cases are not being investigated, including hundreds of murders by terrorists.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our veterans now that they have to look over their shoulders as a result of spurious and vexatious complaints in relation to allegations of which they have already been cleared? Why is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our servicemen and women?

Karen Bradley: I have had such discussions with the Chief Constable this morning. We need to ensure that there are arrangements in place so that the way in which the arrest warrant system has operated, very successfully, in Northern Ireland can continue.

Security Situation

4. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland.

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Mr Jayawardena: I welcome what my right hon. Friend says, but how can it be right that loyal octogenarian veterans now have to look over their shoulders as a result of spurious and vexatious complaints in relation to allegations of which they have already been cleared? Is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our servicemen and women?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for his constituents on this matter. I am sure he will agree with me that the current mechanisms for investigating the past are not delivering either for victims or for veterans. Right now, too many cases are not being investigated, including hundreds of murders by terrorists.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our veterans now that they have to look over their shoulders as a result of spurious and vexatious complaints in relation to allegations of which they have already been cleared? Why is it not time for a statute of limitations to back our servicemen and women?

Karen Bradley: I have had such discussions with the Chief Constable this morning. We need to ensure that there are arrangements in place so that the way in which the arrest warrant system has operated, very successfully, in Northern Ireland can continue.

Article 50 Negotiations

5. Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): When she plans next to meet the director of the taskforce on article 50 negotiations.

Karen Bradley: As I have said, I discussed this matter with the Chief Constable this morning. We need to ensure that there are arrangements in place so that the way in which the arrest warrant system has operated, very successfully, in Northern Ireland can continue.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. Will the Minister therefore enlighten the House about the timetable for publishing the Government’s policy on the backstop for the Northern Ireland border, and as I say, with the discussions ongoing, will the Secretary of State discuss that with the Chief negotiator?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we do not give a running commentary on all the meetings we have, but he should be aware that there is certainly a backstop and it will last until the end of December 2021.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind) rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not see any Member standing on the Government Benches—[Interruption.] Yes, there is. Mr Duncan Smith, calm yourself. I call Charlie Elphicke.

Charlie Elphicke: Does the Minister agree that threats from the European Union about having a hard border in Northern Ireland are simply unhelpful, and that what we need is co-operation in the use of technology so that things can continue to flow just as they do today?
Mr Vara: May I just say that the European Commission has agreed, in the joint report it signed in December, that there will be no hard border—no physical infrastructure on the border? It is also incumbent on us to make sure that the details of the Belfast agreement are met, which means ensuring that there is not a hard border.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Are any conversations going on with the taskforce with regards to the extension of the article 50 period? If so, will the Minister reiterate that that would be rejected totally and out of hand?

Mr Vara: As I said earlier, we will not be giving an ongoing commentary on all our meetings. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have the implementation period until the end of December 2020, and then the backstop agreement, but only if that is required under specific circumstances, and no more.

Leaving the EU: Agricultural Sector

6. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What steps she is taking to help ensure the sustainability of the agricultural sector in Northern Ireland after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shashi Vara): I recognise how fundamental agriculture is to Northern Ireland economically, socially and culturally.

The Secretary of State and I are fully committed to ensuring that, as negotiations progress, the unique interests of Northern Ireland are protected and advanced. We want to take the opportunities that leaving brings to reform the UK’s agricultural policy and ensure we make the most of those for our farmers and exporters.

Drew Hendry: Bagged salad, seed potatoes and beef are the high-quality products that make up a third of Northern Irish farmers’ exports. Those farmers rely on the EU for around 90% of their income, and they would see animal and plant health tariffs and produce checks as a nightmare. How can the Minister guarantee those farmers a future income and a market while also guaranteeing environmental standards?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman is right: agriculture and farming is a massive industry in Northern Ireland. Some 49,000 people are employed in the sector and there are 25,000 farms. What I will say to him is that if we can get that overall economic framework with the EU through negotiations, the tariffs he refers to will not apply.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Mark Francois.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): At the second time of asking, Question 7, Sir.

Armed Forces Veterans: Legacy Investigations

7. Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on legacy investigations into the conduct of armed forces veterans in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence about a number of issues relating to Northern Ireland.

Mr Francois: This House knows that, were it not for the bravery of the British Army, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, George Cross, there would never have been a Good Friday agreement. Yet the Secretary of State’s proposals include legacy investigations into veterans—in some cases going back 50 years. Will she agree to give evidence to the Defence Committee inquiry into this matter so that we can ask her how her proposals are compatible with the principles of the armed forces covenant?

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. As I said at the recent Police Federation conference in Northern Ireland, we owe all those who served an enormous debt of gratitude. Without the contribution of our armed forces and police, there would quite simply have been no peace process in Northern Ireland. I want to reassure my right hon. Friend that we are consulting on how to address the legacy of the past. This is a consultation.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester is a garrison city, and numerous constituents who have retired from the services are affected by uncertainty. I have no problem with crimes being investigated where there is evidence, but what comfort can the Secretary of State give those servicemen and ex-servicemen in my constituency who have served honourably and are living under a cloud of suspicion and uncertainty?

Karen Bradley: Those people are living under that cloud of uncertainty under the current system, and I want to see an end to the disproportionate focus on our veterans that is happening under that current mechanism. There is widespread agreement that the current system is not working. I urge the hon. Gentleman and all his constituents to respond to the consultation—we are consulting.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): An end to disproportionate focus is not the answer we need. What we need is for a line to be drawn, and the way to do that is to have a statute of limitations and a truth recovery process. Why has the Secretary of State excluded that from the consultation when it was supposed to be included?

Karen Bradley: I know that my right hon. Friend feels strongly about this issue. I urge him to respond to the consultation—I repeat, it is a consultation. There are differing views on this matter and differences of opinion, and we do need to hear from everybody.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Our armed forces and security forces served bravely and valiantly during the troubles. What action has the Secretary of State taken to ensure that no one who served is unnecessarily dragged into the criminal justice system for actions that have already been investigated?

Karen Bradley: Again, I urge the hon. Lady to respond to the consultation. We want to get this right. We want to make sure that we have a proportionate, fair and just response, but let us remember that 90% of all murders in the troubles were committed by terrorists.
Legacy Issues

8. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What progress she has made on the consultation on addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past. [905869]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The consultation entitle “Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland’s Past” launched on 11 May and will run until 10 September. We are determined to provide a better outcomes for victims and survivors, and to ensure there is not a disproportionate focus on former soldiers and police officers.

Mr Wragg: Even though it is absent from the legacy consultation, and further to the questions asked by my right hon. Friends the Members for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), will the Secretary of State reconsider promoting a statute of limitations so that veterans are protected from legal assault and are not hounded into old age?

Karen Bradley: There are strong views on this matter and I urge everybody who has views to respond to the consultation. There are a number of different opinions.

Q1. [905947] Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Con): What is the Prime Minister’s remarks concerning the terrorist attack on the Finsbury Park mosque. One year on, it is right that we remember it.

Following the agreements to which the UK signed up at the Paris climate change summit, will the Prime Minister now commit to a new UK climate change target of zero net emissions before 2050?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has been leading the way in relation to dealing with climate change. The United Kingdom was, I think, the first country to bring in legislation relating to it, and the Government have a good record in dealing with these issues. Crucially, we have ensured that we remain committed to the Paris accord. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who played a key role in ensuring that the Paris accord was agreed to and that everybody signed up to it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): When determining the legacy of Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State ensure that the wishes of the vast majority of people on either side of Northern Ireland are acknowledged? They draw a massive distinction between the perpetrators of violence and those who suffered as a result of it.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes that point very well. We do need to make the distinction that 90% of all killings were murders by terrorists.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Dr Whitehead: I concur with the Prime Minister’s remarks concerning the terrorist attack on the Finsbury Park mosque. One year on, it is right that we remember it.

Q3. [905949] Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Dorset is the home of the Jurassic coast, but my right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that it is not full of dinosaurs. [Laughter.] We are a modern, embrace-the-day sort of a county.

All my North Dorset constituents want to ensure the safety and dignity of women. As a husband and father, I do, too. Will the Prime Minister confirm that we will make the horror of upskirting illegal quickly, and in Government time?

The Prime Minister: I reassure my hon. Friend that I agree with him: upskirting is a hideous invasion of privacy. It leaves victims feeling degraded and distressed. We will adopt this as a Government Bill. We will introduce the Bill to the Commons this Thursday, with Second Reading before the summer recess, but we are not stopping there. We will also ensure that the most serious offenders are added to the sex offenders register, and victims should be in no doubt that their complaints will be taken seriously and perpetrators will be punished.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in welcoming my friend, Imam Mohammed Mahmoud, here today. He showed enormous humanity and presence of mind on that terrible day a year ago, when he prevented violence from breaking out on the streets of my constituency. I thank him and all the religious leaders in the local community who did so much to bind people together. As a country, we should be bound together in condemning racism in any form wherever it arises.

I was pleased that the Prime Minister mentioned the Windrush generation. I, too, join her in commemorating that event, when the Windrush generation arrived in this country. I hope that the hostile environment will be put behind us, and that we will take a special moment today to welcome a daughter of the Windrush generation as a new Member of this House. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) brings to this House enormous experience of dealing with the problems of poverty and dislocation in her borough, and she will make a great contribution to the House.

Today marks World Refugee Day—a time to reflect on the human misery of 65 million refugees displaced across the globe. There is a responsibility on all political
leaders both to aid refugees and to act to tackle the crises and the conflicts that drive this vast movement of people.

The Prime Minister said—[HON. MEMBERS: “A question?”] Thank you. The Prime Minister said that extra funding for the national health service will come from three sources: Brexit, economic growth and the taxation system. Well, there can be no Brexit dividend before 2022. Economic growth is the slowest since 2009, so which taxes are going up?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman mentioned a number of issues in his opening question. First, I take this opportunity to say that when I visited Finsbury Park mosque after the attack, I was struck by the very close work that was being done by a number of faith leaders in that community. I commend them for the work that they are doing—they were doing it then, and that I know they continue to do it. We see such work in other communities, including in my own constituency of Maidenhead.

The right hon. Gentleman ended up by asking a question. I think, on the national health service, so can I be very clear about this? We have set out a long-term plan for the NHS. That is securing the future for the national health service. We have set a five-year funding settlement. That will be funded. There will be money that we are no longer sending to the EU that we will be able to spend on our NHS—[Interruption.] Hon. Members may shout about this, but I know that that issue is not the policy of Labour Front Benchers. In relation to money that we are no longer sending to the EU being spent on the NHS, the shadow Housing Secretary called it “bogus”, and the shadow Health Secretary said it was a deceit. Perhaps I can tell them what another Labour Member said a few weeks ago: “we will use funds returned from Brussels after Brexit to invest in our public services”.

That was the right hon. Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am very pleased that the Prime Minister is reading my speeches so closely. I said that the money sent to the EU should be ring-fenced to support for agriculture, the money sent to the EU should be ring-fenced to regions, support for agriculture, the money sent to the EU should be ring-fenced to immigration, we need to plan, so which taxes are going up?

The Prime Minister: As I said on Monday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set out the full funding package. We will listen to people and he will set it out properly before the spending review. I am interested that the right hon. Gentleman has now confirmed that the Labour party thinks there will be money coming back from the European Union. I think there is one circumstance in which there would be no money coming back from the EU: if we adopted Labour’s policy of getting a deal at whatever price.

Jeremy Corbyn: At the weekend, the Prime Minister said that “about £600 million a week more in cash” would be spent on the NHS. She continued: “That will be through the Brexit dividend.”

Our net contribution to the European Union is about £8.5 billion a year, but £600 million a week is more than £30 billion a year. Her figures are so dodgy that they belong on the side of a bus. We expect that from the Foreign Secretary, but why is the Prime Minister pushing her own Mickey Mouse figures?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is so concerned about people’s taxation, why, when we increased the personal allowance, thereby taking nearly 4 million people out of paying income tax altogether, did he and the Labour party oppose it?

Jeremy Corbyn: Last night, the Prime Minister sent an email to Conservative party members telling them: “The money we now send to the EU will go to the NHS”. The Government’s own Office for Budget Responsibility says we will not see any dividend until at least 2023. The Prime Minister talks about a strong economy, but our economic growth last year was the slowest of any major economy, and it has already been downgraded this year. If growth does not meet expectations, does that mean—this is the question—extra borrowing or higher mystery taxes?

The Prime Minister: It is the balanced approach that this Government take to our economy that has enabled us—[Interruption.] Oh, they all groan! They do not like to hear that there is a fundamental difference between us and the Labour party. We do believe in keeping taxes low, we do believe in putting money into our public services, and we also believe in dealing with our debt and making sure that we get debt falling. What would the Labour party do? The Labour party would not have money to put into the national health service, because the Labour party would bankrupt our economy. And yes, if we are talking about the amount of money that is being put into the NHS, let us just look at what the Labour party offered at the last election. The Labour party said that 2.2% more growth for the NHS would make it “the envy of the world”.

Well, I have to say to my right hon. and hon. Friends that I chose not to listen to that. We are not putting in 2.2% more growth; we are putting in 3.4% more growth.
Jeremy Corbyn: Under Labour the NHS increase would have been 5% this year, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies confirmed that this year there would be £7.7 billion more for the NHS. What is the Prime Minister’s offer? She has promised £394 million per week without saying where any of it is coming from, apart from those mysterious phantom taxes that the Chancellor is presumably dreaming up at this very moment.

There is a human element to all issues surrounding the national health service and public spending. Let me give an example. Virginia wrote to me last week. She said:

“my diabetic daughter has fallen down on 4 occasions in the last month. She has both legs in plaster and is being told there isn’t enough money for the NHS to give her a wheelchair”.

The IFS says that the NHS needs 3.3% just to maintain current provision, which I remind the Prime Minister is at crisis levels. Does she think that standing still is good enough for Virginia, or for anyone else who is waiting for the treatment that they need and deserve?

The Prime Minister: We are putting in extra money to ensure that we see improved care in the NHS. Let me remind the right hon. Gentleman what the chief executive of NHS England, Simon Stevens, has said of our announcement. He said:

“we can now face the next five years with renewed certainty. This multi-year settlement provides the funding we need to shape a long-term plan for key improvements in cancer, mental health and other critical services.”

If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about what the Labour party does in relation to the health service—and that is where he started—let us look not at what it says, but at what it actually does. For every £1 extra that we spend on the NHS in England, Labour in Wales spends only 84p. Typical Labour: say one thing and do another.

Jeremy Corbyn: Health spending grew by 5% in Wales last year, rather more than in England. The Prime Minister’s 3.4% is actually just 3%, as it is only for NHS England. There is nothing for public health budgets, nothing for community health, and, vitally, nothing for social care. That is less than is needed just to stand still.

After the longest funding squeeze in history, A&E waits are at their worst ever, 4 million people are now on NHS waiting lists, and the cancer treatment target has not been met for over three years. Nurse numbers are falling, GP numbers are falling, and there are 100,000 staff vacancies. NHS trusts are £1 billion in deficit, and there is a £1.3 billion funding gap in social care. The Prime Minister is writing IOUs just to stand still. Until the Government can be straight with people about where the money is coming from, why should anyone, anywhere, trust them on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman why people should trust us on the national health service. Over the 70 years of the NHS, for 43 of those years it has been under the stewardship of a Conservative Government. Despite taking difficult and necessary decisions on public spending in 2010 as a result of the deficit left by the last Labour Government, we have consistently put extra money into the NHS. We have now announced a national health service plan that gives it certainty of funding for the next five years, and, working with clinicians and others in the NHS, we will see a 10-year plan to improve services and to improve care for patients. The right hon. Gentleman can stand up here all he likes and talk about the Labour party’s plans for money, but what we know is that the Labour party’s plans would bankrupt this economy. The IFS has said:

“Labour would not raise as much money as they claim even in the short run, let alone the long run.”

In short, its plan “absolutely doesn’t add up”: Conservatives putting more money into the national health service; Labour losing control of the public finances and bankrupting Britain.

Q4. [05950] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Reports from the Health Foundation across our front pages this week conclude that millennials will face worse health problems than their parents and that a key cause of this is relationship challenges, yet only 31% of millennials say they had strong relationships and support networks while growing up. What action is the Prime Minister taking in response to calls from over 60 hon. Friends to strengthen family relationships?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Friend for continuing to highlight this important issue of family support and family relationships, and we are determined to do as much as we can to support families. That is why we are providing for high-quality relationships education, helping children to be equipped and prepared to maintain healthy and respectful relationships in their adult lives. The Department for Work and Pensions is providing relationship support services to families through the voluntary sector, and, backed up by up to £39 million, the reducing parental conflict programme will help councillors across England integrate support for family relationships into the local services for families. As my hon. Friend says, and as she has said before, children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict can experience a decline in their mental health; we understand the importance of supporting families at an early stage.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on the incident a year ago at the Finsbury Park mosque?

Many of us in this House will be aware of the deeply distressing audio and images of children separated from their parents in US detention centres. Infants as young as 18 months are being caged like animals, babies of eight months are being left isolated in rooms, and last night the former head of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement said he expects hundreds of these children never to be reunited with their parents—lost in the system, orphaned by the US Government. Is the Prime Minister still intending to roll out the red carpet for Donald Trump?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am pleased to see him in this Chamber to be able to ask his questions? But on the very important issue he has raised of what we have seen in the United States, the pictures of children being held in what appear to be cages are deeply disturbing: this is wrong; this is not something that we agree with.
This is not the United Kingdom’s approach; indeed, when I was Home Secretary I ended the routine detention of families with children. We have a special, long-standing and enduring relationship with the United States and there will rightly be a range of issues that I will be discussing with President Trump about our shared interests, and it is important that we make sure that when we welcome and see the President of the United States here in the United Kingdom we are able to have those discussions, which mean that when we disagree with what they are doing we say so.

Ian Blackford: I have to say that that is a disappointing answer from the Prime Minister. We should all be unreservedly condemning the actions of Donald Trump, and I ask the Prime Minister to do that. On the issue of immigration, while the US Administration call it a zero-tolerance policy, the Prime Minister calls it a hostile environment. We know that this Government detain children in detention centres here in the UK. The UK is the only EU country to detain people indefinitely. Will the Prime Minister today, on World Refugee Day, show some leadership and end her policy of indefinite detention?

The Prime Minister: First, in relation to the right hon. Gentleman’s question about what is happening in the United States, I clearly, wholly and unequivocally said that that was wrong. On the issue of the detention policy here in the United Kingdom, he referred to the detention of families with children and, as I have said, we ended the routine detention of families with children early after 2010. We do, on occasion, need to detain people, but we take their welfare extremely seriously. That is why, when I was Home Secretary, I commissioned Stephen Shaw, the former prisons and probation ombudsman, to look at this issue. As a result of his report, we introduced the at-risk policy, which means that we have a clear presumption that adults who are at risk should not be detained, along with better mental health provision for them. We have asked him to go back and look at this issue again, and he has reported. We are carefully studying that report and will publish in due course.

Lucy Allan: Last year, the number of children in the care system in England rose to a record of 73,000, with huge social and economic consequences. The care crisis review, published last week, found that the drivers of that increase included a risk-averse blame culture and a failure to direct spending to family support. Will the Prime Minister ensure that her children’s Minister considers the review’s recommendations, and will she commit to ensuring that state intervention to remove children from families is used only as a last resort?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend’s concerns and have dealt with issues of contaminated land sites and development on them in my constituency in the past. We take local residents’ safety seriously in relation to contaminated land, and we ensure that the guidance is regularly updated. Developers are already required to ensure that they comply with a host of legal and regulatory safeguards before they build on contaminated land, and we also require that they work in conjunction with the Environment Agency and meet building regulations to ensure residents’ safety.

The Prime Minister: As I said—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman’s question was heard with courtesy, and the reply must be heard with courtesy.

The Prime Minister: First, I have just said in response to questions about the pictures and the behaviour that we have seen in the United States and about the way children are being treated, that is clearly, wholly and unequivocally wrong. On the wider issue of the President of the United States coming here to the United Kingdom, there are many issues that Members of this House—including the hon. Gentleman’s right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—consistently encourage me to raise with the President of the United States. We do that: when we disagree with the United States, we tell them so. We also have key shared interests with the United States, in the security and defence field and in other areas, and it is right that we are able to sit down and discuss those issues with the President. He is the President of a country with which we have had, and will continue to have, a long-standing special relationship.

Nigel Mills: Residents across Amber Valley are worried about proposals to build housing on land next to sites on which contaminated waste was tipped in the 1970s. Does the Prime Minister agree that planning guidance should be changed to make it clear that a thorough, competent assessment of the risks of contamination should be carried out before permission is given to build houses on such sites?

The Prime Minister: I completely understand my hon. Friend’s concerns and have dealt with issues of contaminated land sites and development on them in my constituency in the past. We take local residents’ safety seriously in relation to contaminated land, and we ensure that the guidance is regularly updated. Developers are already required to ensure that they comply with a host of legal and regulatory safeguards before they build on contaminated land, and we also require that they work in conjunction with the Environment Agency and meet building regulations to ensure residents’ safety.

Ronnie Cowan: The Government granted a licence to British Sugar to grow cannabis on an industrial scale and licensed medical cannabis produced by GW Pharmaceuticals. They have now stalled, proposing that a panel should decide on a one-by-one basis who can benefit from medical cannabis. I am wondering what will happen on day one when 20,000 people apply to that panel. Can the Government not see the writing on the wall? Will they move now to provide medical cannabis under prescription to the many people who would benefit?
**The Prime Minister:** I offer my deepest sympathies to those suffering from severe conditions where other treatments have not been effective and where cannabis-based medicines have the potential to help. I recognise that people suffering from such issues will of course want to look to alleviate their symptoms, but it is important that medicines are carefully and thoroughly assessed to ensure that they meet rigorous standards, so that doctors and patients are assured of their efficacy, their quality and their safety.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced a two-part review yesterday. We see from recent cases that we need to look at this carefully, and the first review will be carried out by the chief medical officer followed by a review from the Advisory Council of the Misuse of Drugs. My right hon. Friend is also acting to set up an expert panel of clinicians that can advise Ministers on any applications to prescribe cannabis-based medicines.

**Q10. [905957]** **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Last Saturday marked two years since the murder of our colleague Jo Cox. Although she is no longer with us, Jo’s legacy still lives on through the work done in her name covering many issues, including loneliness. I welcome yesterday’s announcement of a £20 million fund to combat loneliness, and will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to groups such as Age UK and Brightlife in my constituency that do so much to tackle rural isolation?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in commending the work of the groups in her constituency that she referred to, such as Brightlife and Age UK. She is right that Saturday marked the two-year anniversary of the death of Jo Cox, but she is also right that Jo Cox’s legacy lives on every day in the work on the issues that she cared about, particularly loneliness. I was pleased that we were able to announce £20 million to combat loneliness, and that will be used to help bring people together, to explore the use of technology to connect people in remote areas and to improve transport connections to make face-to-face contact easier. Jo was passionate about seeing a step change in how we deal with loneliness in this country, and we are determined to support the continuation of her work after her sad and tragic death.

**Q6. [905952]** **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Thames Water and other water companies have profit margins close to 20%, paying out a huge £1.4 billion annually often to overseas owners that could be used to cut bills and accelerate repairs. Given that only Welsh Water, a mutual, makes no such payments, when might the Prime Minister get behind the efforts to double the size of the mutual and co-operative contribution to our economy?

**The Prime Minister:** There are many good examples of mutuals and co-operatives that operate in our economy, and they do well and provide services to individuals. There is no limit on the number of mutuals and co-operatives that could be set up. We want a mixed economy, and they play an important part.

**Q11. [905958]** **Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that I have raised the issue of more beds for Hereford County Hospital no fewer than 12 times over the years. Will she now confirm that the funding is in place to deliver those much-needed beds?

**The Prime Minister:** As my hon. Friend says, he has been a consistent campaigner on this particular issue. We have announced over £3.9 billion of new additional capital funding for the NHS up to 2022-23, and the majority of that is to support the implementation of the local sustainability and transformation partnership plans. Major projects are under consideration across the country, and we intend to announce one large-scale scheme the size of the Shrewsbury and Telford plan every year going forward. They will be based on high-quality plans, but they will arise from local NHS leaders. It is important that such plans are driven by the local NHS, but they will ensure better care for patients.

**Q7. [905953]** **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): It is said there is no greater pain than losing a child, especially in circumstances that are entirely and easily avoidable. My Slough constituent Mark Scaife, whose son Michael tragically drowned in the Jubilee river, was shocked to learn that schools are not required to teach water safety and the impact of cold water shock. Does the Prime Minister agree that, as we are currently in the middle of the Royal Life Saving Society’s annual Drowning Prevention Week, now is the opportune moment to discuss this matter with ministerial colleagues and to announce the compulsory inclusion of these vital lessons?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. Our sympathies are with the family.

We take the teaching of water safety very seriously, which is why we are supporting the National Water Safety Forum’s national drowning prevention strategy, which aims to achieve a 50% reduction in drownings by 2026 by encouraging people to stay safe while enjoying themselves. We have made sure that swimming and water safety is compulsory in the national curriculum for physical education at primary level, but we recognise there is more to do. We have established an implementation group, and we are reviewing the recommendations of the report, which is part of the Sporting Future strategy that aims to improve the swimming curriculum.

**Q14. [905961]** **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The Prime Minister knows that I, as the son of a doctor and a pharmacist, share her strong commitment to the NHS. Will she reassure me and this House that the additional funding that is being provided will lead to measurable improvements in patient outcomes so that this extra money is spent as wisely as possible?

**The Prime Minister:** I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. We do not want to see money going to the NHS and being wasted or spent on bureaucracy, and not actually getting to patient care. That is why it is so important that, alongside the extra money, as part of the 10-year plan we will be working with the NHS on making sure not only that we see better outcomes for patients as a result of this extra money but that the money is spent wisely and in the interest of patients.
Q12. [905959] Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): After four weeks of Northern Rail chaos, passengers in the north of England have had enough. The Government have said that Network Rail did not deliver and that Northern was not prepared, but I have been handed emails from within the Department for Transport that show Ministers and officials were warned of impending chaos as long as two years ago. These emails are a disgrace. In them, officials describe key Northern routes as valueless, discuss “a classic handling strategy” for Members of Parliament, discuss whether to throw “a sop” to Northern passenger groups and debate whether to propagate myths in order to divert public attention from agreed planned route closures.

Will the Prime Minister explain to the House why she has withheld this key information from us and from the public? Or is she so incompetent that she literally does not have a clue what is going on in her own Government?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady refers to documents that she describes as having been leaked from the Department for Transport. No Government respond from the Dispatch Box to leaked documents they have not seen. In advance of the timetable changes for both Northern and Govia in May, a separate independent panel was set up by the DfT to reassure the Department about the nature of those plans.

Lisa Nandy indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady may shake her head, but that independent panel was set up, and that independent panel advised the Department for Transport.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware that Birmingham airport will have 15% fewer international flights than otherwise, and that Manchester airport will have 11% fewer, Newcastle 14% will have fewer and Bournemouth will have more than 40% fewer, by 2030 as a result of Heathrow expansion? How do we help investment in our regions by suffocating the regional airports’ growth?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend asks about expanding Heathrow and the impact it is going to have on regional airports, so may I just tell her one anecdote? When we made our first announcement about the in principle decision on the third runway at Heathrow, I went down to Cornwall and visited Newquay. People there were very pleased and welcomed the announcement, because of the ability it was going to give them to improve their local economy and expand their tourist industry, in particular.

Q13. [905960] Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Today, 123,000 individuals will visit community pharmacies across Northern Ireland. As the Prime Minister knows, the pharmacies are the front door and shop window of the health service, so telling them that the best way to solve their problem when they have a shortfall of more than £20 million is to write to a defunct Assembly is not an answer to their problem. What is she able to do for community pharmacists across Ulster today?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the value of community pharmacies. I think everybody across this House recognises the valuable work they do in communities, and indeed we have recognised it with our £100 million contribution to a health transformation fund. We have done and will continue to do what we can in the absence of an Executive to protect the delivery of vital public services.

The Secretary of State’s budget for 2018-19 addresses the key pressures across public services, including the Northern Ireland health service, and she will be bringing forward legislation to put the budget position on a legal footing. I know that she will be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this issue further.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in paying tribute to the bravery of the imam from the mosque in Finsbury Park? May I also pay tribute to two people who are also in the Gallery today and who have shown dignity, bravery and integrity: the parents of Alfie Dingley? Alfie got the licence yesterday so that he will not have so many fits, which is what we know this treatment will do. I thank the Prime Minister and, in particular, the Attorney General for their input into this, but I want us to try to work with the family so that we can speed this up for other families. I know that is the most important thing the family want now.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that I too, welcome the parents of Alfie Dingley and commend them for the dignity they have shown in dealing with this difficult issue of ensuring that what they wanted to see for their son was available. As my right hon. Friend has said, a licence has now been issued, but it is right—this is the point of the reviews that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set up—to make sure that our process of considering these drugs to ensure that they are going to be efficacious and safe for patients is not a long drawn-out one, because the length of process, as, sadly, Alfie’s parents found, can be deeply distressing.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The European Union and Michel Barnier say that they do not want a hard border on the island of Ireland, and we agree with that, but in his remarks yesterday on security co-operation it seemed to be erecting barriers in the way of the best possible co-operation between the UK and the rest of the Europe. The Belfast Telegraph, in its editorial today, says that this brinkmanship by the EU is a boon to terrorists. Will the Prime Minister make it clear that that kind of approach is completely wrong? It appears that the EU wants to make Brexit harder for the UK but easier for those who want to cause damage across Europe.

The Prime Minister: The future security partnership we want with the EU is an important part of the deal that we are negotiating with it. I set out our intentions on that security partnership in the speech I gave at the Munich security conference. I fully recognise the importance of this, and in particular, of some of the instruments we have been able to use within the European Union, to the working of the police across the border of Northern Ireland and Ireland, and to ensuring that those who would seek to do the people of Northern Ireland harm are apprehended, prevented from doing so and brought to justice. I am absolutely clear that that security partnership is a key, important and essential element of what we are negotiating.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In the Gallery today are two young men from my Cleethorpes constituency, Callum Procter and Oliver Freeston, both of whom won seats on North East Lincolnshire Council at last month’s elections. Oliver is just 18 years old and is perhaps the youngest councillor in the country. Will the Prime Minister congratulate Callum and Oliver? Does she agree that it is this country that provides the policies that allow young people to prosper and be successful?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome Callum and Oliver and to congratulate them on their important success in the May local government elections. The fact that it is under this Government and this party that we see an 18-year-old taking a seat on the council shows that, as my hon. Friend says, it is this Government who are ensuring that young people have the opportunities to prosper and to pursue their hopes.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The conclusions of the Gosport independent panel, which I set up with the Secretary of State’s support when I was a Minister, are truly shocking, not only because of the fact that 456 people lost their lives following the inappropriate prescribing of opioids, but because there was a closing of ranks that prevented families from getting to the truth. Does the Prime Minister agree that there now needs to be an independent and thorough police investigation by another force? Will she agree to meet me and family representatives to discuss the report’s implications? Does she agree that we must never again ignore families in this way and that there must be a mechanism whereby when allegations of wrongdoing are raised, they are investigated immediately, and that that mechanism must include the family?

The Prime Minister: My thoughts, and I am sure those of everybody in the House, will be with all the families of the patients who died as a result of what happened at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. The events there were tragic and deeply troubling, they brought unimaginable heartache to the families concerned, and they are a matter with which the whole House should be concerned. The right hon. Gentleman raised the way in which the public sector often, in his terms, closes ranks; that is an issue that we have to deal with across the public sector.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for establishing the inquiry when he was a Minister. I am sorry that it took so long for the families to get the answers from the NHS. I thank Bishop Jones and his fellow panel members for what they have done, and I would be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman with Bishop Jones. This case shows why it is absolutely right that my right hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). This has been a chilling week for those of us from right across the House who believe in the values of tolerance and diversity. It is not just President Trump: Viktor Orbán has proposed a new tax on organisations that defend refugees and the Italian Government are targeting the Roma people. It is good that the Prime Minister said that President Trump’s policy is wrong, but I want her to do more, and I think that the House wants her to do more. What is she going to do proactively to defend those values? What work is she going to do with Chancellor Merkel and President Macron to make it clear to the rest of the world and to the European Union that these other values, which are so inimical to our country, cannot stand?

The Prime Minister: We do work with Governments across Europe, particularly with the French and German Governments, on these issues of migration in relation to Europe. We expect all members of the international community to adhere to international law and commitments to human rights. As a Government, we oppose extremism in all forms, including when such extremism threatens to damage ethnic and community relations. We believe in the fundamental values of liberty, of democracy and of respect for human rights. We will continue to work with others to ensure that it is those values that are pre-eminent in everything that we and they do.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister’s renewed commitment to the NHS is extremely welcome. Recently, the Health and Social Care Committee visited the Larwood House GP surgery in Worksop where, generally, all patients are seen by the doctors the same day. What more can the Government do to make sure that this best practice among GP practices is spread across the whole country so that all of our constituents can get in to see a doctor when they need to?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. One principle underpinning what we will be looking to the NHS to do across its 10-year plan is to ensure that the best practice that we see in many parts of the NHS is indeed spread across the whole of the NHS so that patients are able to get the access and the same standards that they need across the NHS. I commend the work that has been done in the GP surgery to which he has referred in his constituency. This is very important. I also commend work that is being done elsewhere to bring services together to ensure that patients see an improvement in the care and treatment that they receive.
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The last Labour Government oversaw a 5.9% increase in spending on the NHS. The Thatcher and Major Governments managed 3.6%. So far, the Prime Minister’s predecessor, David Cameron, and the right hon. Lady herself have managed 1.9%. Why, therefore, are we meant to be happy and amazed by her unfunded pledge to deliver an increase of 3.4%, which is under the annual average achieved since the NHS was first created?

The Prime Minister: As was recognised by the chief executive of NHS England, this is the funding that the NHS needs. Crucially, giving a multi-year funding settlement based on a long-term 10-year plan will give the NHS the stability and the certainty that it needs to be able to introduce the transformation that we all want to see in patient care. We will also ensure that, unlike what happened under the Labour party, this money will be seen in improved patient care.
Gosport Independent Panel: Publication of Report

12.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This morning, the Gosport Independent Panel published its report on what happened at Gosport Memorial Hospital between 1987 and 2001. Its findings can only be described as truly shocking. The panel found that, over the period, the lives of more than 450 patients were shortened by clinically inappropriate use of opioid analgesics, with an additional 200 lives also likely to have been shortened if missing medical records are taken into account.

The first concerns were raised by brave nurse whistleblowers in 1991, but then systematically ignored. Families first raised concerns in 1998 and they, too, were ignored. In short, there was a catalogue of failings by the local NHS, Hampshire constabulary, the General Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the coroners and, as steward of the system, the Department of Health.

Nothing I say today will lessen the anguish and pain of families who have campaigned for 20 years for justice after the loss of a loved one. But I can at least, on behalf of the Government and the NHS, apologise for what happened and what they have been through. Had the establishment listened when junior NHS staff spoke out, and had the establishment listened when ordinary families raised concerns instead of treating them as “troublemakers”, many of those deaths would not have happened.

I pay tribute to those families for their courage and determination to find the truth. As Bishop James Jones, who led the panel, says in his introduction: “what has to be recognised by those who head up our public institutions is how difficult it is for ordinary people to challenge the closing of ranks of those who hold power...it is a lonely place seeking answers that others wish you were not asking.”

I also thank Bishop Jones and his panel for their extremely thorough and often harrowing work. I particularly want to thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Caroline Dinenage), who, as my Minister of State in 2013, came to me and asked me to overturn the official advice (Norman Lamb), who, as my Minister of State in 2013, came to me and asked me to overturn the official advice he had received that there should not be an independent panel. I accepted his advice and can say today that, without his campaigning in and out of office, justice would have been denied to hundreds of families.

In order to maintain trust with the families, the panel followed a “families first” approach in its work, which meant that the families were shown the report before it was presented to Parliament. I, too, saw it for the first time only this morning, so today is an initial response and the Government will bring forward a more considered response in the autumn.

That response will need to consider the answers to some very important questions. Why was the Baker report, completed in 2003, only able to be published 10 years later? The clear advice was given that it could not be published during police investigations and while inquests were being concluded, but can it be right for our systems to have to wait 10 years before learning critically important lessons that could save the lives of other patients? Likewise, why did the GMC and NMC, the regulators with responsibility for keeping the public safe from rogue practice, take so long? The doctor principally involved was found guilty of serious professional misconduct in 2010, but why was there a 10-year delay before her actions were considered by a fitness to practise panel? While the incidents seemed to involve one doctor in particular, why was the practice not stopped by supervising consultants or nurses who would have known from their professional training that these doses were wrong?

Why did Hampshire constabulary conduct investigations that the report says were “limited in their depth and range of offences pursued”, and why did the Crown Prosecution Service not consider corporate liability and health and safety offences? Why did the coroner and assistant deputy coroner take nearly two years to proceed with inquests after the CPS had decided not to prosecute? Finally and more broadly, was there an institutional desire to blame the issues on one rogue doctor rather than to examine systemic failings that prevented issues from being picked up and dealt with quickly, driven, as the report suggests it may have been, by a desire to protect organisational reputations?

I want to reassure the public that important changes have taken place since these events that would make the catalogue of failures listed in the report less likely. These include the work of the Care Quality Commission as an independent inspectorate with a strong focus on patient safety, the introduction of the duty of candour and the learning from deaths programmes, and the establishment of medical examiners across NHS hospitals from next April. But today’s report shows that we still need to ask ourselves searching questions as to whether we have got everything right. We will do that as thoroughly and quickly as possible when we come back to the House with our full response.

Families will want to know what happens next. I hope that they and hon. Members will understand the need to avoid making any statement that could prejudice the pursuit of justice. The police, working with the Crown Prosecution Service and clinicians as necessary, will now carefully examine the new material in the report before determining their next steps, in particular whether criminal charges should now be brought. In my own mind, I am clear that any further action by the relevant criminal justice and health authorities must be thorough, transparent and independent of any organisation that may have an institutional vested interest in the outcome. For that reason, Hampshire constabulary will want to consider carefully whether further police investigations should be undertaken by another police force.

My Department will provide support for families from today, as the panel’s work has now concluded, and I intend to meet as many of the families as I can before we give our detailed response in the autumn. I am also delighted that Bishop James Jones has agreed to continue to provide a link to the families, and to lead a meeting with them in October to allow them to understand progress on the agenda and any further processes that follow the report. I commend the role played by the current MP for the area, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who campaigned tirelessly for an independent inquiry and is unable to be here today because she is with the affected families in Portsmouth.
For others who are reading about what happened and have concerns that it may also have affected their loved ones, we have put in place a helpline. The number is available on the Gosport Independent Panel website and the Department of Health and Social Care website. We are putting in place counselling provision for those affected by the tragic events and who would find it helpful.

Let me finish by quoting again from Bishop Jones’s foreword to the report. He talks powerfully about the sense of betrayal felt by families:

“Handing over a loved one to a hospital, to doctors and nurses, is an act of trust and you take for granted that they will always do that which is best for the one you love.”

Today’s report will shake that trust, but we should not allow it to cast a shadow over the remarkable dedication of the vast majority of people working incredibly hard on the NHS frontline. Working with those professionals, the Government will leave no stone unturned to restore that trust. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the shadow Secretary of State—the Secretary of State made reference to this point in passing—I think that it is only fair to mention to the House that a number of colleagues whose constituencies have been affected by the events at Gosport Hospital are unable to speak in these exchanges because they serve either as Ministers or, in one case, as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. It should be acknowledged and respected that a number of those affected individuals are present on the Front Bench. I am of course referring to the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage); the Secretary of State for International Development, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt); the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman); and the hon. Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery).

1.3 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement. I welcome the tone of his remarks and the apology that he has offered on behalf of the Government and the national health service.

This is a devastating, shocking and heartbreaking report. Our thoughts must be with the families of the 456 patients whose lives were shortened. I, like the Secretary of State, pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), whose persistence in establishing this inquiry in the face of a bureaucracy that, in his own words, attempted to close ranks, must be applauded. I know that other Members have also played an important part, including the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), who is in his place, and the Minister for Care, who is understandably and properly in her Gosport constituency this afternoon. I also thank all those who served on the inquiry panel, and offer particular thanks for the extraordinary dedication, calm, compassionate, relentless and determined leadership—yet again—of the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, in uncovering an injustice and revealing a truth about a shameful episode in our nation’s recent history.

As the Secretary of State quoted, the Right Rev. James Jones said:

“Handing over a loved one to a hospital, to doctors and nurses, is an act of trust and you take for granted that they will always do that which is best for the one you love.”

That trust was betrayed. He continued:

“Whereas a large number of patients and their relatives understood that their admission to the hospital was for either rehabilitation or respite care, they were, in effect, put on a terminal care pathway.”

Others will come to their own judgment, but for me that is unforgivable.

This is a substantial, 400-page report that was only published in the last hour or so, and it will take some time for the House to fully absorb each and every detail, but let me offer a few reflections and ask a few questions of the Secretary of State. Like the Secretary of State, the question that lingers in my mind is, how could this have been allowed to go on for so long? How could so many warnings go unheeded?

The report is clear that concerns were first raised by a nurse in 1991. The hospital chose not to rectify the practice of prescribing the drugs involved. Concerns were raised at a national level, and the report runs through a complicated set of back and forths between different versions of health trusts and successor health trusts, management bodies and national bodies about what to do and what sort of inquiry would be appropriate. An inquiry was eventually conducted and it found an “almost routine use of opiates” that “almost certainly shortened the lives of some patients”.

It seems that that report was left on a shelf, gathering dust.

I am sure that many of the officials and players acted in good faith but, taken as a whole, there was a systemic failure properly to investigate what went wrong and to rectify the situation. In the words of the report, serious allegations were handled “in a way that limits the impact on the organisation and its perceived reputation.”

The consequence of that failure was devastating.

To this day, the NHS landscape understandably remains complex and is often fragmented. How confident is the Secretary of State that similar failures—if, God forbid, they were to happen again somewhere—would be more easily rectified in the future? Equally, as the Secretary of State recognises, there are questions about Hampshire constabulary. As the report says, “the quality of the police investigations was consistently poor.”

Why is it that the police investigated the deaths of 92 patients, yet no prosecutions were brought? The report has only just been published, but what early discussions will the Secretary of State be having with the Home Secretary to ensure that police constabularies are equipped to carry out investigations of this nature, if anything so devastating were to happen anywhere else?

What about the voice of the families? Why did families who had lost loved ones have to take on such a burden and a toll to demand answers? It is clear that the concerns of families were often too readily dismissed and treated as irritants. It is shameful. No family should be put through that. I recognise that the Secretary of State has done work on this in the past and I genuinely pay tribute to him, but how can he ensure that the family voice is heard fully in future? He is right that we must be cautious in our remarks today, but can he give me the reassurance that all the relevant authorities will
properly investigate and take this further? If there is a police investigation, can he guarantee that a different force will carry it out? I also want the Secretary of State to give us some more general reassurances. Is he satisfied that the oversight of medicines in the NHS is now tight enough that incidents such as this could never be allowed to happen again? What wider lessons are there for patient safety in the NHS? Is additional legislation now required? Does he see a need for any tightening of the draft Health Service Safety Investigations Bill to reflect the learnings from this case?

The Right Rev. James Jones has provided a serious, devastating, far-reaching service in a far-reaching report. Aggrieved families have had to suffer the most terrible injustice. In the next few weeks, we will rightly acknowledge 70 years of our national health service. The Secretary of State is right to say that this must not cast a shadow over the extraordinary work done every day by health professionals in our NHS. But on this occasion, the system has let so many down. We must ask ourselves why that was allowed to happen and dedicate ourselves to ensuring that it never happens again.

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Health Secretary for the considered tone of his comments. I agree with everything he says. Members across the House will understand that we are all constrained in what we can say about the individual doctor concerned—because that is now a matter for the police and the CPS to take forward—but we are not constrained in debating what system lessons can be learned, and we should debate them fully, not just today but in the future. The big question for us is not so much, “How could this have happened once?”—because in a huge healthcare system we are, unfortunately, always occasionally going to get things that go wrong, however horrific that sometimes is—but, “How could it have been allowed to go on for so long without being stopped?”

Reflecting the hon. Gentleman’s comments, the poor treatment of whistleblowers, the ignoring of families and the closing of ranks is wrong, and we must stop it. We must go further than we have gone to date. In a way, though, it is straightforward, because we know exactly what the problem is and we just have to make sure that the culture changes. The more difficult bit is where there were process issues that happened in good faith but had a terrible outcome.

In particular, this report is a salutary lesson about the importance of transparency. Obviously I had only a couple of hours to read it—so not very long—but it looks as though the Baker report was left to gather dust for 10 years, for the perfectly straightforward and understandable reason that people said that it could not be published in the course of a police investigation or while an inquest was going on. I am speculating here, but I am pretty certain that had it been published, transparency would have prompted much more rapid action, and some of the things that we may now decide to do we would have done much, much earlier. That is an incredibly powerful argument for the transparency that has sadly been lacking.

How confident can I be that this would not happen again? I do think that the culture is changing in the NHS, that the NHS is more transparent and more open, and that interactions with families are much better than they were. However, I do not, by any means, think that we are there yet. I think that we will uncover from this a number of things that we are still not getting right.

As the hon. Gentleman will understand, it is not a decision for the Government as to which police force conducts these investigations. We have separation of powers and that has to be a matter for the police. One of the things that we have to ask about police investigations is whether forces have access to the expertise they need to decide whether they should prioritise an investigation. When the medical establishment closes ranks, it can be difficult for the police to know whether they should challenge that, and it does appear that that happened in this case.

In terms of wider lessons on the oversight of medicines and the Health Service Safety Investigations Bill, we will certainly take on board whether any changes need to be made there.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): The culture of closing ranks and ignoring whistleblowers in the NHS is gravely worrying. Even as a new MP, I have had constituency cases where people have alerted me to this, and I feel that it could still happen today. What implications will the report have for the wider health service, particularly for elderly care and people who have family members in these situations?

Mr Hunt: There is one very important point that the shadow Health Secretary mentioned that it is important to understand from this report. We very often have a problem where people in an end of life situation are not treated in the way that we would want for our own relatives or parents. To put it very bluntly, the worry is that someone’s end may be hastened more quickly than it should be. We have made a number of changes, including scrapping the Liverpool care pathway, which happened under the coalition Government. But in this case, these patients were not in an end of life situation. They were actually going to the hospital for rehabilitation and expecting to recover—but they were old. One of the things that we will have to try to understand—all of us—is how this could have been allowed to happen and how this culture developed. I am afraid that the report is very clear that, inasmuch as the doctor was responsible—I have to be careful with my words here—lots of other people knew what was going on.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. There is much in it that I agree with, both in tone and content.

These are truly horrific events, and our first thoughts must always be with the families of those who have been affected by this scandal. It is deeply distressing to lose a loved one in any circumstance and the circumstances in this case, with all the press coverage, will only have amplified that distress for everyone concerned.

When the inquiry was originally announced, it was expected to take two years, and it is extremely disappointing that it has stretched out until now. There has no doubt been a catastrophic failure of monitoring and accountability, not only with regard to the doctor concerned but those who failed to investigate these actions. The Government
are also included in this failure. However, I am grateful to the Secretary of State for issuing the apology that he has today, and welcome the fact that the Government will bring forward more considered responses in the autumn.

I sincerely hope that this will be the beginning of justice, and ultimately closure, for the families affected. I hope that the Secretary of State will support the opening of criminal investigations into the events following the report’s findings. The public find it very difficult to have faith in health regulators who act both as investigators and prosecutors—and even the judge—in complaints. I hope that he will look at this aspect to ensure public confidence and faith in the healthcare regulation system in the future.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with what he says. Of course, if the police decide to bring forward criminal prosecutions, that would have the support of the Government, but the police must make that decision independently. If a family feel that an injustice has been done, who can they go to if they feel that ranks are being closed? I think we have made progress on that question, but we need to reflect very carefully on whether it is enough progress.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The events at the hospital and the panel’s report are of significant interest to me and my constituents, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), on whose behalf I am also speaking. His constituents and mine have asked whether the families can be confident that the report’s findings will be acted on and that people will be held accountable for what happened.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to ask that question. The best parallel is the Hillsborough process, which was also led by Bishop Jones. A similar report was published that put documents into the public arena, essentially enabling people to understand truthfully what happened. On the basis of that, inquests were reopened, criminal prosecutions happened and so on. We are at that stage of the process. I hope that the transparency and thoroughness of the report will give families hope that they are at last being listened to.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I first thank the Secretary of State for backing and trusting my judgment in 2013, without hesitation, and proceeding with this panel inquiry? I join him in paying tribute to the work of Bishop James Jones and the whole panel. Bishop James Jones is a remarkable man who has shown extraordinary clarity of thought that has, in a very impressive way, built the trust of families who have been involved in this process.

I am not sure that I share the Secretary of State’s confidence that an earlier publication of the Baker report would have resulted in the transparency he called for, bearing in mind that I had to intervene in 2013 to stop a statement being made that there would be no public inquiry even after the publication of that report. Does he agree that we have to find a way of overcoming the problem of having different inquiries through inquests, through the police and through regulators, because, together, those stopped the vital information getting out into the public domain and stopped proper investigation into these issues? Does he also agree that we need a mechanism to ensure that in future families are never ignored again, and that when legitimate allegations of wrongdoing are made, they are investigated properly and families are involved in that process?

Mr Hunt: First, I again pay tribute to the role that the right hon. Gentleman played. One of the most difficult things for any Minister is knowing when to accept advice, which is what we do most of the time, and when to overrule it. His instincts have been proved absolutely right. It is not an easy thing to do, and it causes all sorts of feathers to be ruffled, but he stuck to his guns, and rightly so. Bishop James Jones, who is a truly remarkable public servant, talked in the Hillsborough panel report about the “patronising disposition of unaccountable power”. That is what we have to be incredibly on guard against.

The right hon. Gentleman is right: at the heart is the problem that we did not listen to families early enough and we did not listen to whistleblowers inside the NHS early enough. My reason for saying that all these things need to see the sunlight of transparency much sooner is frankly that if they had come to light sooner and if proper attention had been given to this in 2001—we all know that Mid Staffs started in 2005—how many other lessons and tragedies throughout the health service could have been avoided? That is why I think it would be the wrong reaction today to say that we are getting there on patient safety and that transparency problems are solved: there is a lot further to go.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Within the last few hours, I have learned that I have a constituent whose grandmother had recovered from successful hip surgery without the need for any drug interventions and was sent to Gosport War Memorial Hospital for rehabilitation, only to be given a lethal cocktail of drugs that killed her. The matter was reported to Gosport police when it happened in 1998. Does the Secretary of State agree that if people are found wilfully to have administered lethal drug doses unnecessarily, they deserve to lose their liberty, and that if people are found wilfully to have covered up such crimes—for that is what they are—they deserve to lose their jobs?

Mr Hunt: I think everyone in the House would share my right hon. Friend’s sentiments, but we have to let the law take its course, and we have to make sure that justice is done, because it has been denied for too long.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents, I thank the Secretary of State for the apology and the statement today. Can he confirm that all families affected have been contacted and say a bit more about the support that will be available to those who have lost loved ones?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. All the families who think they had a relative affected have been part of the panel process, and they were all invited for a briefing by Bishop Jones this morning in Portsmouth. We will provide ongoing support and counselling if necessary through the Department of Health and Social Care, which was a specific request of Bishop Jones. We are also conscious that when people read the news, they
may suddenly decide that they or a loved one were affected by this. We have set up a helpline so that people can contact us and we can help them to trace whether they too have been affected.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does not every instance of people being scared to speak out and relatives finding it too difficult to complain underline the importance of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch, which the Secretary of State has established? I remind him that I am chairing the Joint Committee of both Houses that is carrying out prelegislative scrutiny of the draft Health Service Safety Investigations Bill. When we report on 24 July, will my right hon. Friend undertake to bring that into law as quickly as possible? That will afford the safe space that people need to report such matters without fear or favour.

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. I commend my right hon. Friend for his work and for being one of the colleagues in this place who have thought and talked about the importance of getting the right safety culture in the NHS. The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch matters because in situations such as this, it could have been called in, done a totally independent investigation, got to the truth of what was happening quickly and prevented a recurrence of the problem. That is one of a number of things that we need to think about.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Ten years ago, a constituent came to see me called Mrs Gillian McKenzie. She told me a story that sounded so far-fetched that I struggled to believe it. In her opinion, her mother and many other elderly people had effectively been killed before their time at a hospital in Gosport. I found it staggering. I then read the hundreds of pages of documents that this amazing woman, Mrs McKenzie, had put together over the weekend, and I came to the harrowing conclusion that there could be a chance of a significant number of early deaths at the Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

I was a candidate then, not the MP. I contacted my good friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), and I took Mrs McKenzie and relatives up to London to meet him. He agreed that this could be something wicked beyond compare. Over the next few years, there was continual campaigning and lobbying, and continual push back. Finally—I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend—we got this commission off the ground. By the way, Mr Speaker, Mrs McKenzie is now 84. I saw her on Saturday evening, wished her luck and gave her a hug. Twenty years later, we are talking about the deaths of more than 450 and possibly 600 elderly people. The relatives today got the truth.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the very highest respect for the hon. Gentleman and for his keen interest in and experience of this issue, and I am exercising some latitude for Back Benchers and for the Secretary of State on this extremely sober matter, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman is at least approaching something that has a question mark at the end of it.

Stephen Lloyd: I am, Mr Speaker. I appreciate the latitude.

Mr Hunt: There can be no justice unless the truth is put on the table. That is the crucial first step, and now justice must proceed. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his campaign for Mrs McKenzie. Perhaps the best words I can use are these of the panel in the report:

“... Mrs McKenzie. I am sure the relatives and I were right. Your concerns are shown to be valid.”

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I echo the tribute to the work of Bishop James Jones and the integrity and diligence that he and the panel have shown in conducting this inquiry. The Secretary of State has rightly focused on the impact on families, and I was pleased to hear in his statement that there will be a helpline for families who suspect that they have been affected—not least because the immediate catchment area around Gosport includes a lot of retirement homes, and many families whose elderly relatives went to the area to retire may live some distance away. Given the publicity that the report has given rise to, a considerable number of people may need to get in touch. Will he ensure that the helpline is adequately resourced?

Mr Hunt: Yes, I will absolutely do that. I ought to say that I know my hon. Friend. Friend met many families and relatives during his time as a Minister in my Department, and he always dealt with those cases with a huge amount of compassion. The facts of the matter are, according to the report, that 650-plus people had their lives shortened, but we are in touch with only about 100 families, so we are expecting more people to come forward.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I, too, join in the comments that have made about the remarkable work of Bishop James Jones—not only in this important report, but on Hillsborough and on mediating with the Government last summer about moving the contaminated blood inquiry away from the Department of Health. I seek an assurance from the Secretary of State about the approach that Bishop Jones has put forward, which is the “families first” approach. Is there now a commitment from the Government to making that approach—families first—the hallmark of any inquiry that is ever held in the future?

Mr Hunt: I think actions speak louder than words. Such an approach is what Bishop Jones requested on this occasion, and we have done that. We obviously need to think through some process issues, because when a Minister wants to report to the House, they need to be a little bit informed as to what they are talking about. However, I think we have found a way to do that with this report and with the Francis report, so I think it is a good template.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): May I commend the diligence and determination of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), without whose efforts we would not be hearing the truth today, as grim and disturbing as that truth might be? Does my right hon. Friend agree that this raises further
questions about the way in which doctors’ performance and patient safety are monitored? With the GMC, doctors are in effect policing themselves. Is it not time to say that this system has to change?

Mr Hunt: We do have to ask those questions, and we have to be able to respond to the concerns of my hon. Friend and his constituents about how we can be absolutely certain there will not be a closing of ranks. My experience, however, is that doctors are very quick to want to remove those of their number who are letting the profession down because this damages everyone’s reputation. There are some very difficult questions for the GMC and for the NMC. Because their processes took so long, I do not think they can put their hand on their heart and say that they have kept patients safe during that period.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The legislation regulating both doctors and healthcare professionals is now 35 years old. It is inefficient, outdated and—as I know from a constituency case in which the individual concerned is into the fifth year of her complaint to the GMC—not user-friendly for the complainant. The GMC and other healthcare professionals want change and the Secretary of State’s Department has already consulted on change, so will he give a guarantee that he will bring forward legislation to ensure that the system is not only effective, but effective for patients who make complaints?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we have a regulatory landscape that is very complex, does not achieve the results we want, and forces regulators to spend time doing things they do not want to do and does not give them enough time for things they do want to do. Obviously, because of the parliamentary arithmetic, if we are able to get parliamentary consensus on such a change, that would speed forward the legislation.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): There are many “if onlys”, but one of them is: if only the junior doctors and others who spoke up had been listened to. I know my right hon. Friend is committed to making sure that people and whistleblowers are listened to and that he is committed to transparency. Will he say a bit more about what he is doing to make sure that everyone involved in patient care—from consultants to healthcare assistants, porters, patients and families—are listened to and that their concerns are acted on?

Mr Hunt: I think we have made progress when it comes to whistleblowing because every trust now has a “freedom to speak up” guardian—an independent person inside the trust whom clinicians can contact if they have patient safety concerns. That is a big step forward, which was recommended by Robert Francis. Where I am less clear is that we have solved the problem in relation to having someone for families to go to if they think that everyone is closing ranks, and we now need to reflect on that.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my history of working in the NHS.

A brave nurse came forward all those many years ago to highlight a concern, but the concern was not taken forward adequately at that time. Often in these circumstances, the NHS closes ranks, management remove the individual who raises the concern—the clinician in this instance—and allows the system to continue. Is there some way of monitoring the types of concerns raised by clinicians, ensuring that the staff who raise these concerns are not themselves penalised and that the system then takes accountability forward?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that matter. The nurse concerned, Anita Tubbritt, talks in the report about her concerns and the pressure that she was put under, and it was a brave thing to do. When the hon. Lady reads the report, she will see that nurse auxiliaries and others who were not professionally trained clinicians also came forward with concerns and were also worried about the impact that doing so would have on their own career. That is what we have got to stop because, in whatever part of the UK, getting a culture in which people can speak openly about patient safety issues is absolutely essential.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I was a junior doctor at the Royal Hospital Haslar in Gosport, which is just around the corner from the Gosport War Memorial Hospital, so I know that hospital fairly well, and I also know that the people of Gosport will be disappointed and distressed by this, since they very much value their community hospital.

Does the Secretary of State agree with me that there is an issue about the governance of smaller institutions, as we have seen in the past? I in no way wish to disparage the excellent work done by community hospitals, of which I have been a champion for many years, but will he look specifically at the pages in the report that touch on this? There is an issue about governing and ensuring safety in small institutions—whether in general practice or in hospitals?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I think that that is actually an excellent point, and we should definitely look at it. Big hospitals have clear lines of accountability—boards, chief executives—but those often do not exist in community hospitals and there is no one who can say they are the boss of that trust, so we should look at that.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The grandmother of one of my constituents died in Gosport War Memorial Hospital in January 1999—in other words, after concerns were being raised by families and by staff at the hospital. The family believe that her morphine dose was well above that needed for her reported pain. I thank the Health Secretary for the tone of his statement, and I also thank Bishop Jones for the work he did on this inquiry. Does the Secretary of State believe that this report shows a need for tightening the draft Health Service Safety Investigations Bill?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I do not want to jump to a conclusion about any changes to the draft Bill. However, we should definitely reflect on any legislative changes that might be needed as a result of this report, and that Bill could be a very powerful vehicle for doing so.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has mentioned trust, and as a doctor myself, I am very aware of and humbled by the fact that people come to me with their children and
put their trust in me to look after them. When events such as this occur, trusts can be shaken, and it is therefore important that these things are dealt with quickly. In this case, the investigation, since complaints were first received, has been going on for far too long. What will my right hon. Friend do to reassure people that any such complaints will be dealt with much more quickly in future, and that opportunities to save lives will not be lost in the meantime?

Mr Hunt: That is the big question we have to answer for both the House and the British people. However, I would say to the hon. Lady that I am confident that, where there is unsafe practice, it is surfaced much more quickly now in the NHS than it has been in the past. I am less confident about whether we have removed the bureaucratic obstacles that mean the processes of doing such investigations are not delayed inordinately so that the broader lessons that need to be learned can be learned.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): One of the reasons for the growing success of the “Getting it right first time” programme is the creation of clinician-agreed datasets. Will the Secretary of State give the House an assurance that there will in future be proper analysis of the data on the excess number of deaths and the use of this particular type of drug in excessive amounts? Such analysis would have shown this hospital as an outlier, so questions could have been asked, as is now happening successfully with the GIRFT programme.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his championing of the GIRFT programme, which is incredibly powerful and successful. He will have noticed that we announced last week that we are expanding it into a national clinical information programme, which will cover more than 70% of consultants. What is disturbing in this case, though, if I may say so, is that the data was really around mortality, and we have actually had that data for this whole period. There is really nothing to stop anyone looking at data, and we can see a spike in the mortality rates in this hospital between 1997 and 2001. They go down dramatically in 2001, when the practices around opiates were changed. That is why we have to ask ourselves the very difficult question about why no one looked at that data or, if they did, why no one did anything about it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Secretary of State commit to look at the wider structural issues that affect patient safety, and particularly at things such as staffing levels and pressures on doctors and nurses?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. One of the big lessons from this report is that we have to look at systemic issues as much as at the practice of an individual doctor or nurse.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for getting us to this point. I was deeply concerned to hear in the Secretary of State’s statement that Ministers had been given advice not to proceed with this independent panel. Is the Secretary of State convinced that Ministers are now receiving better advice?

Mr Hunt: Of course that is an issue that we will look into. I would just say, in the interests of transparency, that the Department of Health has been on the same journey as the whole of the rest of the NHS with respect to patient safety issues.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that this report highlights the importance of the CQC to the NHS and patient safety? Will he consider giving that body greater regulatory powers?

Mr Hunt: The legal independence of the CQC, and its ability to act as the nation’s whistleblower-in-chief, is one of the big, important reforms of recent years, and I think that will give the public confidence. However, I do not think that that is the entire answer, and I still think there is an issue about who families go to when they think they are being ignored by the establishment.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): We have had Mid Staffs, Morecambe Bay and now the Gosport War Memorial Hospital. That tells us that significant patient failures are not one-offs; indeed, the Francis report of 2013 was one of the most challenging public documents I have ever read. My right hon. Friend has made patient safety a personal priority, with his customary judgment and compassion. Can he confirm that this developing culture within the NHS remains a priority for him and that the NHS will do all that it can to protect the most frail and vulnerable that it looks after?

Mr Hunt: That is absolutely my priority, and my hon. Friend worked very closely with me on that when he was my Parliamentary Private Secretary. Changing culture is a long, long process, but I think we can start through some of the things we do in this House Reacting afresh to this report, and not just saying, “We’ve done what we need to, because we had Mid Staffs and Morecambe Bay,” is a very important next step.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): For me, the two most shocking things are the number of deaths and the length of time it has taken for this scandal to be exposed. Further to the earlier question, until the Secretary of State overruled it, the official advice from the Department of Health was that this public inquiry should not take place. Is there going to be an official investigation into why that official advice was given and which civil servant should be held accountable for it?

Mr Hunt: We will, of course, look at that. That was why I said in my statement that there were failures by the Department of Health—the specific incident needs to be looked at—and also as the steward of the system in which so many other things went wrong.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that all deaths in the NHS will be properly assessed by a coroner or a medical examiner so that lessons can be learned and avoidable deaths minimised?

Mr Hunt: I can confirm that, from next April, all hospital deaths will be examined by an independent doctor—this is the medical examiner process. We are expanding the learning from deaths programme to primary care. That is exactly where we want to go.
Points of Order

1.44 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This month is Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month, yet as we celebrate the distinct and important contribution of our Gypsy, Traveller and Roma community—an ancient history across these islands—one of our closest allies, through the office of the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Italy, is systematically targeting the Roma community of Italy. Can you advise Members how the House can express its utter dismay that one of our close allies is targeting one of Europe’s most distinct communities, and one of its most vulnerable, in such a heinous fashion?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice that he wished to put it. The matter will be of concern to hon. and right hon. Members across the House. The hon. Gentleman will recall that the matter was raised in questions to the Prime Minister. I am confident that Members of this House—the hon. Gentleman included—will continue to find ways to express their opposition to these developments and, as they think fit, and if appropriate, to press the Government for action or representations on the matter.

More specifically, in so far as the hon. Gentleman in his point of order inquired what a Member could do to flag up concern, the answer is that, beyond statements in the Chamber and the opportunities that might be presented by debate, hon. Members are perfectly at liberty to table and sign early-day motions. I think the hon. Gentleman will require no further information or encouragement than I have already provided.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Wednesday, in a debate I called in Westminster Hall, the Minister for Immigration responded on the Home Office’s treatment of highly skilled migrants by saying:

“no applicants have been successful at judicial review, and...38 appeals have been allowed, mostly on human rights grounds.”—[Official Report, 13 June 2018, Vol. 642, c. 420WH.]

First, my understanding is that appeals can be allowed only on human rights grounds under section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998. More worryingly, several sources have been in touch with me to say that people have been successful at judicial review, either because the Home Office decision has been overturned, or because the Home Office settled via a consent order and then granted indefinite leave to remain.

I am very concerned that the Minister for Immigration has misled the House in Westminster Hall, as far as I could ascertain. I think it would be useful if the Minister could come to the House to explain the statement that she made last week, because it is deeply concerning that while people have quite clearly won at judicial review, the Minister either did not know that or did not share it with the House.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that every Member of this House is responsible for the veracity of what he or she says to it. That includes Ministers. If a Minister feels that he or she has erred—and to err is human—and has inadvertently given incorrect information to the House, it is open to, and it would I think be thought incumbent upon, that Member to correct the record. It is not for me to act as arbiter of whether that is required, but the hon. Lady, who is now a relatively experienced and certainly a very dextrous Member of the House, has found the means to register her concern. I feel sure that that concern will be communicated to the relevant occupant of the Treasury Bench ere long. As to what then happens, we await events.

If there are no further—[Interruption.] Yes, I am coming to that. I am extremely grateful to the Clerk, who is very on the ball as always, for his procedural expertise. I was just going to say that if there are no further points of order on other matters, we come now to the point of order from Mr Craig Mackinlay.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to make an apology to the House. In 2001—some 17 years ago—I incorporated a company, Mama Airlines Ltd, on the back of a business idea: the potential for a low-cost airline, with Manston to Malaga a possible route. The company has never traded, has never had a bank account, and has 2p of share capital that I own. That is the entirety of its balance sheet. I have never received reward or remuneration of any kind. It was an idea of its day and, following the tragedy of 9/11, it never came to anything and plans ceased.

It remains a dormant company and, personally, I have never had any subsequent thoughts of creating an airline, nor of using the registered company for any other activity. I had not considered, under any commonsense interpretation of the rules, that such a shareholding of 2p in a dormant company that has never traded would require registration under the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I was wrong to rely on common sense, as there is no de minimis value threshold once the 15% shareholding limit has been reached.

This business idea is no secret, Mr Speaker. I mention the fact with some pride on public platforms, in the local press, in election literature and to whoever will listen. I would be surprised if there was anyone in South Thanet who was unaware of this long-past business idea. Not surprisingly, Manston airport is a relevant local issue, and I will continue to speak up for an aviation future for Manston, which would bring with it jobs and investment to east Kent.

The registration of my interest will now be recorded appropriately in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests under the rectification procedure. The interest should have been registered from 8 May 2015. Given the registrable interest, it also becomes a declarable one. It would now appear that, under the rules, my shareholding
in a dormant company with no assets and certainly no aircraft makes me the ongoing owner of a quite unique airline that is never going to fly. I identify two occasions when a declaration might reasonably have been made. I should have prefaced my speeches on 28 May 2015 and 11 June 2015 with a declaration that I hold 2p worth of shares in the dormant company. I most sincerely apologise to the House for my error and oversight.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the apology he has given to the House and, if I may say so, for the good humour he has displayed in the course of making his statement. I think it is acknowledged and accepted by the House.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been made aware of reports in the past few minutes that seriously sick Labour Members might be prevented from voting this afternoon because of Government Whips breaking with the usual convention of allowing them to be nodded through? This would constitute a serious breach of the conventions of this House. I would be grateful if you could make a ruling, Mr Speaker, so that the Government Whips could hear it.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the point of order. The short answer is that I had heard nothing of that until he sidled up to the Chair and mentioned it. The practice has long taken place on the basis of co-operation between the usual channels. There is nothing unusual about the arrangement—it is very long-established and commonplace—but it does not bear upon or speak to the functions of the Chair. It is a matter that has to be agreed between the different sides of the House. The right hon. Gentleman is a very experienced Member of this House and he has registered, with some force and alacrity, his strength of feeling on the matter.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for former Members of the Houses of Parliament to take a seat at the Conservative table in the Tea Room and plot against the Government that they were once a part of? Would not those former Members be better off tending to their moats?

Mr Speaker: What I say to the hon. Gentleman is that who turns up at which table and says what to whom in the Tea Room might be a matter for the Administration Committee. The hon. Gentleman, who is himself an experienced denizen of the House, could potentially raise it, with advantage, with his hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who is not merely a distinguished ornament of that Committee, but in fact chairs it. As the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) knows, I am not myself these days in the habit of going into the Tea Room and I am not privy to these matters, but he has raised his point in his own delightfully understated way, with which Members on both sides of the House are well familiar.

BILL PRESENTED

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary David Gauke, Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Damian Hinds, the Solicitor General and Victoria Atkins, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with offences relating to offensive weapons.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 232) with explanatory notes (Bill 232-EN).
Armed Forces Representative Body

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

1.55 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create a staff association to represent the interests of members of Her Majesty’s Armed Forces as employees; and for connected purposes.

In a week in which there has been much division and rancour in this place, I am glad to say there is one area on which we can reliably reach a broad consensus: when we talk about the service rendered by those who serve in our armed forces, not only in the way they willingly put themselves in harm’s way to protect that which we hold dear, but the way in which service fundamentally shapes anyone’s life, dictating where personnel live, how often they move, and, ultimately, how often they can see those they love. It is a sacrifice too few of the population understand.

If I am being honest, Mr Speaker, serving in the armed forces is a choice that many do not consider because of those immense sacrifices. I include myself in that category, even if it has proven to be an effective route for the advancement of diminutive working-class boys from the west of Scotland like myself. I do, however, come from a services family: my father a Royal Engineer, just like my nephew, and my brother beginning in the Highland Light Infantry, the 52 Lowland Battalion, before ending up in 6 SCOTS, where he currently serves.

If there is one thing I have noticed, it is the anomaly between those family and friends who have put themselves in harm’s way wearing an Army uniform, and those who have put themselves in harm’s way wearing a police or fire brigade uniform. Put a hero in a uniform and call them police or a firefighter, and they have a professional body or trade union to represent their interests; put them in an Army, Navy or RAF uniform and they do not. I cannot for the life of me see why. Similarly, as we talk of these public servants in such heroic terms, we often forget that they are also normal employees, with much one major missing piece in the ongoing struggle to consider throughout any of the periods they have had in government. I can only hope they will willingly put themselves in harm’s way to protect that which we hold dear, but the way in which service fundamentally shapes anyone’s life, dictating where personnel live, how often they move, and, ultimately, how often they can see those they love. It is a sacrifice too few of the population understand.

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Let me be clear for all hon. Members—and, I would hope, all hon. and gallant Members—here today: this Bill honours a commitment in my party’s manifesto that seeks to create an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing, just like the Police Federation we have in each of the nations of these islands. Crucially, just like the Police Federation, it would not have the power to strike and thus it would not be appropriate to call it a trade union. However, I consider this to be very much one major missing piece in the ongoing struggle for the rights of employees, albeit one that I believe that both those on the Front Benches of the Conservative and Labour parties have not deemed important enough to consider throughout any of the periods they have had in government. I can only hope they will follow the Scottish National party’s lead here today and support the Bill, although I do salute the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who presented a private Member’s Bill on this matter nearly 10 years ago.

Quite simply, if the armed forces can speak with one voice, all 194,140 of them, then that voice would be one that the Government of the day would have to listen to. Improved economic and working conditions would follow.

The current status quo is failing service personnel, and ultimately, the relatively weak position that the disparate stakeholders find themselves in is not working in their favour.

Of course, serving personnel may join trade unions or professional associations linked to the work that they do, along with sectional groups that specifically represent their interests inside the armed forces, and we know that the work of the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body and the service complaints ombudsman is always welcomed. We also know that those in Main Building have often found it too easy to disregard their findings.

While the excellent network of the service families charities—I had an interesting meeting with the Naval Families Federation in my constituency office last Friday—along with SSAFA, Poppyscotland and many others, are diligent and determined champions for those in the armed forces community, I cannot help but conclude that their excellent work is no substitute for a united organisation whose single and unambiguous duty is to its members, and only its members. While there is a British Armed Forces Federation, it does not have the same level of recognition from the Government as similar bodies elsewhere.

It is actually an arrangement that is not so unusual among the small, northern European states in our neighbourhood, along with Germany and Australia, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands all have different forms of armed forces representative bodies, some of which are trade unions and some of which are more informal, but which, none the less, are recognised negotiating or welfare bodies.

Some of those examples may have been what provoked some of the criticism of this Bill when it was written about in The Sunday Post last weekend. While I expected the usual nonsense about representation and advocacy somehow leading towards a permanent decline in standards and discipline, I was astonished at some of the bad faith arguments by those who would consider themselves experts in defence and security. Let me be clear again to anyone who would seek to block this Bill: all that is needed to secure better pay and conditions for those in the armed services is some more money from the Treasury and good will from Main Building. They are not living in the real world.

The personnel challenges faced by the Ministry of Defence are not insignificant, and to be fair, nor has its pecuniary response been, with some £664 million being spent over the last five years on recruitment and retention initiatives, and so I would hope that better representation and better prospects for those thinking of enlisting would help to drive that figure down. The recent NAO report on overcoming what now amounts to a skilled personnel shortfall of 5.7% overall, and significantly more in the pinch point trades, makes for eye-opening reading, and ultimately concludes that the current settlement is not sustainable, particularly when skilled forces personnel can make far more on civvy street. This situation will only be exacerbated as the skills expected of personnel move into the next generation of cyber and electronic warfare. In the real world, the armed forces must be able to compete with the tech start-ups.

However, the most compelling argument for an armed forces representative body comes not from looking to the future, but from looking at history. While much of the attention in the Chilcot report ultimately focused on
the decision to go to war and the intelligence used, for many of those who served there, the most damning sections came near the end, when the failures in personnel and equipment planning came to the fore. For those of us, like me, whose loved ones served in the conflict, and even more so for those—some may be here today in the Chamber—who were there, we have to wonder why it took so long for the Government to take action to address these programmes, even though we know so many raised concerns through the chain of command. I leave everyone here to draw their own conclusions as to whether the Government would have been as slow to react to personnel speaking with one strong voice.

If we consider that the end of UK operations in Iraq and Afghanistan also dovetailed with the beginning of austerity, pay freezes and the swinging cuts to our military that this entailed, it is no surprise that there has been an adverse effect on the morale of those who serve. Indeed, it is no surprise that last month’s continuous attitude survey saw overall happiness in the armed forces continue to fall. But there is a disconnect somewhere, because we all know that so much has been done in recent years to improve public perceptions of serving personnel, to make Armed Forces Day more prominent and to make it easier for personnel to make the transition to civilian life.

As I come to a close, let me posit a theory. Those who serve in our armed forces do so for a variety of reasons. I am fairly sure that “being a hero” is not usually one of them. The more that any Government fetishise the idea of heroic sacrifice, while failing in their basic obligations, it will face 194,140 people speaking with one strong voice. Whether the Government would have been as slow to react to personnel speaking with one strong voice.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am grateful to you for allowing me to rise to oppose this Bill, Mr Speaker. Although I share many of the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) in introducing his Bill, I have to say that I do not recognise the complaint that he seeks to address. I have spent time in the Ministry of Defence—admittedly not in the personnel role, but having met countless serving personnel across all services and at all levels—and not once in the nearly four years that I spent there did anybody ever suggest to me that a remedy for some of the natural complaints that serving personnel have from time to time would be the creation of a trade union or staff association. One of the reasons why nobody raised this as an issue—that I was aware of—is that there already are, as the hon. Gentleman touched on, a plethora of existing families federations across each of the services that do a very good job and exist to advocate on behalf of forces personnel and their families some of the issues that he is trying to address through the Bill.

Welfare of serving personnel is the top issue that they seek to contend with, and accommodation is another issue that is always high on their list. It is well acknowledged by service chiefs, the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which has responsibility for military quarters, that a considerable amount of work needs to be done. There is an adverse effect in the military estate to try to bring up to contemporary standards some of the historical garrison accommodation, some of which is not only decades old, but goes back over 100 years. That is something that the Secretary of State is committed to trying to resolve and is working through the families federations to do so.

In addition to the families federations, there are the plethora of charities that support serving personnel, and in particular, veterans. The hon. Gentleman may or may not be aware that there are over 400 service-facing charities up and down this country helping veterans when they leave the service. I pay tribute to the work of COBSEO, which is the organisation that acts as an umbrella for these charity groups. It provides a signposting service for serving personnel as they seek to find their new career and come out of the armed forces, once they have served their tour of duty, to identify the areas where they might need help and support—much of the kind of work that I envisage the hon. Gentleman’s putative staff association might be able to do. It would be nothing short of confusing to add another tier of advice and support through the body that he proposes, because one of the biggest challenges for a service leaver who decides that they need support for a particular direction, whether that is to find employment, housing or medical care, is where they turn to. That is why the existing structure of COBSEO does such a great job. In addition, there is the Veterans’ Gateway, an online resource, funded, I believe, by the MOD, which enables individuals to find the right organisation to support them.

I must ask the hon. Gentleman, because it was not clear from his remarks, what wrong he is trying to right. If he is looking for a voice for serving personnel, as he indicated he was, I must point out that this exists through the families federations. If he is looking for access to the chain of command to represent personnel, I must point out that that is what the chain of command is for. The charities that support personnel in each of the services have continuous access to the chain of command and civil servants in the MOD and directly to Ministers through regular dialogue with the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is sitting on the Front Bench today.

The hon. Gentleman speaks frequently on military matters on behalf of his party, and there is broad agreement across the House, from all parties, that we wish to provide for our serving personnel the highest possible standards of welfare and pay so as to recruit and retain the armed forces we need to keep this country safe. Nobody would doubt the commitment of the Conservative party, and I do not doubt his commitment, to meeting that objective, but I say to him gently that if he really wants to do the right thing for the personnel who serve in Scotland, he should ask his colleagues in the Scottish Government to think very carefully about whether making people pay more in income tax simply for the pleasure of serving Scotland will help us to recruit and retain experienced military personnel. That is a more significant and material measure that could damage the armed forces in Scotland, and he would do
well to think about that, instead of pressing this Bill. I will not press my opposition to a Division, but I hope the House has heard the strength of concern that I have and which is shared by others on the Conservative Benches.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Martin Docherty-Hughes, Ian Blackford, Liz Saville Roberts, Carol Monaghan, Stewart Malcolm McDonald, Douglas Chapman, Angela Crawley, Stephen Gethins, Stewart Hosie, Chris Law, Angus Brendan MacNeil and Pete Wishart present the Bill.

Martin Docherty-Hughes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 233).

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO.4)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7))

That the following provisions shall apply to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 11 September 2017 (European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (Programme)), 16 January 2018 (European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (Programme) (No.2)) and 12 June 2018 (European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (Programme) (No.3)):

Lords Message of 18 June 2018

(1) Proceedings on the Message from the Lords received on 18 June 2018 shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one and a half hours after their commencement at today’s sitting.

(2) The proceedings shall be taken in the following order: Lords Amendments Nos. 19C to 19E, 19G to 19L, 19P, 4B to 4E, 24C and 110B to 110J.

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.—(Mr David Davis.)

Question agreed to.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Before Clause 9

PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL OF THE OUTCOME OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE EU

2.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I beg to move,

That this House agrees with Lords amendments 19C to 19E, 19G to 19L and 19P, and proposes Government amendments to Lords amendment 19P.

Mr Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to consider the following:

Manuscript amendment (b) and amendment (a) to the motion.

Lords amendments 4B to 4E.

Lords amendment 24C

Lords amendments 110B to 110J.

I inform the House that I have selected manuscript amendment (b), in the name of Mr Dominic Grieve, and amendment (a), in the name of Mr Tom Brake. I add, for the convenience of the House, that copies of manuscript amendment (b) are available in the Vote Office.

Mr Davis: I will turn in a moment to the issue at the forefront of many hon. Members’ minds—Parliament’s role at the conclusion of the negotiations with the European Union—but first I want to set out the other issues before the House for approval today. These are all issues where the Lords agreed with the Government on Monday: enhanced protection for certain areas of EU law, family reunification for refugee children and extending sifting arrangements for statutory instruments to the Lords. The Government set out common-sense approaches to those three issues in the Lords, who backed the Government, and the issues now return to this House for final approval.

The fourth issue is, as I have said, Parliament’s role at the conclusion of our negotiations with the EU. Before we turn to the detail, let us take a step back for a moment and consider the long democratic process we have been on to get here. It began with the EU Referendum Act 2015, passed by a majority of 263 in this House, at which point the Government were clear they would respect the outcome of the referendum. This was followed by the referendum itself, which saw a turnout of over 33 million people and 17.4 million people vote in favour of leaving the EU.

We then had the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, which empowered the Government to trigger article 50. Despite the attempts of some in the other place to impugn the validity of this notification, the Act passed through both Houses, with a majority of 372 in this place on Third Reading. This was followed by a general election where both major parties, attracting over 80% of the vote, stood on manifestos that committed to respecting the result of the referendum: 27.5 million votes for parties that said they would respect the referendum—no ifs, no buts. We are now in the process...
of passing this essential Bill to get our statute book ready for the day we leave. It will ensure that we respect the referendum result but exit the European Union in as smooth and orderly a manner as possible.

We have already set out in law that this process will be followed by a motion to approve the final deal we agree with the EU in negotiations. If this is supported by Parliament, as I hope and expect it will be, the Government will introduce the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which Parliament will have time to debate, vote on and amend if they so wish. Finally, as with any international treaty, the withdrawal agreement will be subject to the approval and ratification procedures under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. And this is all before we even consider the other pieces of legislation we have passed and will pass as part of this process.

Anyone who questions the democratic credentials of this Government or this process should consider the steps we have taken to get to this stage and those which we have already laid out in front of us. I believe they are greater than any steps taken for any international negotiations ever in the history of this country. Furthermore, contrary to what was said in the other place on Monday, the Bill gives Parliament significantly more rights than we see on the EU side. The European Parliament simply has to consent to the withdrawal agreement—a yes or no vote—and the EU member states will simply have a vote in the Council on the withdrawal agreement. We have considerably more powers than them, too.

I turn now to the detail of the amendment at hand. We start with a simple purpose: how do we guarantee Parliament’s role in scrutinising the Government in the unlikely event that the preferred scenario does not come to pass? Our intention is straightforward: to conclude negotiations in October and put before both Houses a deal that is worthy of support. In approaching our discussions on this matter, the Government set out three reasonable tests: that we do not undermine the three situations conceived of in the amendment previously mentioned come to pass. Our amendment creates a formal structure, setting out their next steps in relation to negotiations until the end of 21 January 2019, a statement must be made within five days, and a motion must be tabled in both Houses within five sitting days. That would happen whatever the state of the negotiations at that stage.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Davis: I will give way to the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee.

Hilary Benn: When the right hon. Gentleman appeared before the Committee recently, he confirmed that the motion asking the House to approve the withdrawal agreement would be amendable. Can he therefore explain to the House why the Government are now proposing amendments to Lords amendment 19P to include the reference to “neutral terms”? He will be well aware that Standing Order 24B says that, if a motion is considered by Mr Speaker to be in neutral terms, it cannot be amended. Why are the Government prepared to allow an amendable motion in one case, but not in the dire circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman is now describing?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman has prefaced perfectly the rest of my speech, because that is precisely what I shall spend the next 10 minutes explaining to him.

I think that the additional provisions speak for themselves. Our proposed amendment creates a formal structure, set out in law, for Parliament to express its views in all the various scenarios that might come to pass in our exit from the European Union, but it also passes the three tests that were set out by me and by the Prime Minister.

I am glad to see that the amendment sent back to us by the other place accepts the vast majority of these provisions. The core of the disagreement now focuses on the exact nature of the motion offered to the House if any of the unfortunate circumstances that I have previously mentioned come to pass. Our amendment offers those motions in neutral terms. Questions have focused, understandably, on whether that means that they would not be amendable. Members will, of course, be aware that it is not within the competence of Governments to judge whether amendments can be tabled to motions, but for the sake of clarity, let me quote from Standing Order No. 24B:

“Where, in the opinion of the Speaker or the Chair, a motion, That this House... has considered the matter, is expressed in neutral terms, no amendments to it may be tabled.”

I have written to the Chairman of the Procedure Committee setting out how the Government understand that this process will operate in practice and have laid a copy of that letter in the Libraries of both Houses.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am enormously grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene so early in his important speech.

I am most unhappy about the repetition by the Prime Minister, and by others in the Government, of the mantra “no deal is better than a bad deal”. I should like the Secretary of State to give a guarantee to the people...
of Northern Ireland that the Government whom he represents here today will not be gambling with the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. No deal would lead to a hard border, which would inevitably be exploited by Sinn Féin and by new IRA dissenters. I need that guarantee.

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady can be sure that we will not be gambling with the status of the border. I shall come back to the issue of no deal in a moment, because it is central to much of the issue of the amendability of motions.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Is not the importance of the position that the Government are taking that, if a “no deal” option is ruled out, that will guarantee a worse deal in any negotiation? Anyone who has been party to a negotiation will understand that.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, and I shall come back to that point in a second.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The satisfactory amendment that left the House of Lords would oblige the Government to table a substantive motion if their agreement were being rejected. No doubt they would draft that with a view to commanding the majority of the House, but other people could table a substantive amendment with alternative proposals for how to proceed. My right hon. Friend rejects that, and is trying to replace it with a situation in which the Government do not have to put anything in their second amendment, except that they take note. Then, if anyone tries to table a substantive motion as an amendment, I will give you a pound to a penny, Mr Speaker, that the argument will be “If you pass this, it will mean no deal, because the Government are not going to negotiate this, and it will bring the thing to an end.”

I cannot for the life of me see why the Government are hesitating about the Lords amendment, except, of course, that they have come under tremendous pressure from hard Brexiters in the Government, who caused them to reject the perfectly satisfactory understanding that had been reached with Conservative Members who had doubts last week.

Mr Davis: I am afraid that I do not agree with my right hon. and learned Friend, as he will be unsurprised to hear. I will not try to follow him down the path of what might happen and in what circumstances. I shall explain in a moment the reasoning behind the restriction of amendment, which is precisely accurate in this area.

Let me say this to my right hon. and learned Friend. He has been in the House even longer than I have, and he knows full well that very often, when matters are particularly important, the procedural mechanism of a motion does not actually determine its power or its effect. That goes all the way back to the Norway debate, which arose from an Adjournment motion tabled by the Chief Whip of the day, and which changed the course of the war. So I do not take my right hon. and learned Friend’s point at all.

The amendment sent to us by the other place does not offer those motions in neutral terms. It is therefore possible—indeed, I would predict, likely—that wide-ranging amendments will be tabled which would seek to instruct the Government how to proceed in relation to our European Union withdrawal. This may seem to be a minor point of procedure, but it is integral to the nature of the motions, and to whether they pass the three tests that I set out last week.

The debates and amendments of the last week have revolved around what would happen in the event of no deal. Let me explain to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) the distinction between the amendments and the motion that we promised the House—indeed, I think that I first promised it to him as long ago as the article 50 debate. The provisions of the motion will come about if the House rejects the circumstances of a deal, but the amendments apply principally to the issue of no deal, which is really rather different. Let me also make it clear to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) that I have never argued in favour of no deal. I do not favour no deal, and I will do what I can to avoid no deal. It is not an outcome that we are seeking, and, as things stand, I am confident that we will achieve a deal that Parliament can support. However, you cannot enter a negotiation without the right to walk away; if you do, it rapidly ceases to be a negotiation.

The Lords amendment undermines the strength of the United Kingdom in negotiations. There are plenty of voices on the European side of the negotiations who seek to punish us and do us harm—who wish to present us with an unambiguously bad deal. Some would do so to dissuade others from following us, and others would do so with the intention of reversing the referendum, and making us lose our nerve and rejoin the European Union. If it undermines the UK’s ability to walk away, the amendment makes that outcome more likely. That is the paradox. Trying to head off no deal—and this, too, is important to the hon. Lady—is actually making no deal more likely, and that is what we are trying to avoid.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that Opposition Members whose constituents, like mine, voted strongly to leave vote with us, and vote to stop these amendments?

Mr Davis: I take my hon. Friend’s point, but, at the Dispatch Box and elsewhere, I have always insisted that people vote with their consciences, and their consciences should encompass how they represent the wishes of their constituents.

If the European Union expects Parliament to direct the Government to reconsider its policies, to extend article 50 or even to revoke it, it will have an incentive to delay and give us the worst possible deal just to try to bring about such an outcome.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The satisfacory amendment that left the House of Lords would oblige the Government to table a substantive motion if their agreement were being rejected. No doubt they would draft that with a view to commanding the majority of the House, but other people could table a substantive amendment with alternative proposals for how to proceed. My right hon. Friend rejects that, and is trying to replace it with a situation in which the Government do not have to put anything in their second amendment, except that they take note. Then, if anyone tries to table a substantive motion as an amendment, I will give you a pound to a penny, Mr Speaker, that the argument will be “If you pass this, it will mean no deal, because the Government are not going to negotiate this, and it will bring the thing to an end.”

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have seen it at first hand: whenever something happens in the Commons or the Lords that increases uncertainty, negotiations slow down. When they believe we might be forced to change our position to suit them, they stall. We cannot allow such an approach to become commonplace across all negotiations.

While I am glad that we have moved away from the proposition that Parliament can give unilateral, wide-ranging, legally binding instructions to the Government in international matters, an amendable motion nevertheless countenances a situation in which Parliament can direct the Government on how they should proceed. There is a clear difference between Government taking Parliament’s view into account as expressed through a debate and Parliament instructing the Government how to act. That difference is reflected in the two amendments on offer today.

Finally, the amendment by the other place could be used to undermine the result of the referendum. Lord Hailsham willingly admits he believes the decision of the British people in 2016 was, in his words, a “national calamity.” Lord Bilimoria spoke in similar terms previously when he described it as a no-Brexit amendment. This amendment is consistent with our belief: it sets out in law a clear path to follow for those who wish to frustrate the withdrawal from the EU.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Mr Davis:** In a moment.

Our amendment on the other hand is consistent with the notion that it is right for Parliament to express its view but not to instruct the Government on how to conduct themselves in an international negotiation.

**Paul Farrelly** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Davis:** As I have said, it passes the three tests set out by myself and the Prime Minister.

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

**Philip Davies** rose——

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Before we come to the intervention, there is a point of order; I hope it is not a point of frustration.

**Paul Farrelly:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am reading here in the media for the first time a ministerial statement from the Secretary of State purported to explain how “neutral terms” would operate in practice, and I assume that you have seen the statement, Mr Speaker. It says:

“Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion when it is introduced by the Government under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or is not in fact cast in neutral terms and hence whether the motion is or is not amendable.”

Therefore, Mr Speaker, my question to you is this: what discretion does that leave you in practice if such a motion is cast in time-honoured neutral terms in the first place?

**Mr Speaker:** The discretion that I have always had in such circumstances is the short answer to the hon. Gentleman. This matter may or may not be treated of further at a later point in our proceedings, but I do not want to detract from the time available for the debate.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I think the Secretary of State had given way to his hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

**Philip Davies:** I am very grateful.

Will my right hon. Friend commend our hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who on the radio today, with his characteristic openness, said that he hoped that, if the amendment of our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) were passed today, the House would use that in order to suspend the triggering of article 50, which let the cat out of the bag as to what the motive is, which is to delay, frustrate or even stop entirely the UK leaving the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** As I have said throughout, it is for people to go with their consciences on this matter and I do not attack anybody for doing that.

May I pick up on the point of order raised with you, Mr Speaker? I would not want the House to think that in any way it had not been told about this. In my earlier speech, I outlined the issue of “Erskine May” on this matter and Standing Order 24B and your rights in this, and made it plain that that is what we are relying upon. So I would not want the House to be misled in any way, or to believe it has been misled.

The debates on this issue have been in the finest traditions of this House. Hon. Members have stood on issues of principle and argued their cases with the utmost integrity. That has shifted the Government’s approach to a position where our Parliament will rightly and unquestionably have its say and express its view. For in this, the greatest democracy of all, we debate, we argue, we make our cases with passion, but we do it to a purpose and that is to deliver for our people, not just to please ourselves. They decided that we will leave the European Union and, whatever the EU thinks about that, we will do it, and we will do it in the best way we can. And in that spirit I commend this motion to the House.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of the amendment tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) to preserve Lords amendment 19P, which would ensure that Parliament has a meaningful vote in the Brexit process.

We need to be clear about what this amendment is and what it is not. It is not about frustrating or blocking Brexit, it is not about tying the hands of the UK negotiators, and it would not empower Parliament to direct the Government in the ongoing negotiations. It is simply about this House playing a meaningful role in the terms of the final Brexit deal. It is about making sure that on the most important peacetime issue this House has faced for a generation, this House is not silenced.

This amendment addresses two issues: what happens if Parliament rejects the Prime Minister’s proposed article 50 deal in the autumn; and what happens if by
21 January next year there is no article 50 deal or no prospect of an article 50 deal. The Prime Minister has consistently said, “Tough luck; if you don’t like my proposed deal you can have something much worse.” That is not meaningful. The Brexit Secretary, once a great guardian of the role of this House, now wants to sideline Parliament when its voice is most needed. He says that in the event that the Prime Minister's proposed article 50 deal is rejected by Parliament or there is no article 50 deal, a Minister will make a statement. Well, I should think so—after two years of negotiation, the Government bring back a deal which is rejected and a Minister will make a statement. And he says that will happen not in 28 days, but in 21 days—that is democracy; that is giving Parliament a real voice. And then a further safeguard: there will be a neutral motion. There is an example of a neutral motion on today's Order Paper. There is to be a debate about NATO and what will be decided is this:

“That this House has considered NATO.”

That is the additional safeguard—“That this House has considered the article 50 deal.” And that is it; that will be the role of this House on the most important decision that we will make in this Parliament.

No one who values parliamentary sovereignty should accept either approach, and that is why the amendment is crucial. It would require the Government to back up any statement made by a Minister with a motion that can be voted on. It would permit Parliament to have a meaningful say, but only after negotiations are complete.

Of course the very idea of Parliament actually having a say prompts the usual cries, and I have no doubt that many of the interventions will be along these lines, so let me deal with them. The usual cries are these: “It’s an attempt to frustrate Brexit,” “It will weaken the Prime Minister's negotiating hand,” “Parliament cannot micromanage negotiations.” So let me meet those objections.

First, we have heard it all before. In August 2016 we challenged the Government to produce a plan. What did they say? It would frustrate Brexit, it would tie our hands and it would play into the hands of the EU. Then they had to accept a motion to produce a plan, and the sky did not fall in. In the autumn of 2016 we challenged the Government to give Members of this House a vote on the proposed article 50 deal, and got the same response from the same people in this House—it would frustrate the process, it would tie the Prime Minister’s hands and it would play into the hands of the EU. Then we had the Lancaster House speech in January 2017; the Prime Minister agreed to give MPs a vote, and the sky did not fall in.

In December 2017, we challenged the Government to put the article 50 vote into legislation. That was contested through amendment 7, for the usual reasons. We received the usual response: it would frustrate Brexit, it would play into the hands of the EU and it would tie the Prime Minister’s hands. Amendment 7 was voted on, and the vote went against the Government. The sky did not fall in. In February this year, we challenged the Government to publish the impact assessments. We got the usual response: it would frustrate Brexit, it would tie the Prime Minister’s hands and it would play into the hands of the EU. Then the impact assessments were published, and the sky did not fall in. This amendment is not about frustrating the process; it is about making sure that there is a process.

Secondly, we have to confront the fact that the biggest threat to an orderly Brexit, and the biggest threat of having no deal, is and always has been division at the heart of the Government. They cannot agree the fundamentals. The customs arrangements were hardly an unexpected issue. No one should be under any illusion that the EU cannot see the fundamental weakness of the Government’s position.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will the shadow Secretary of State confirm that the Labour party is not trying to frustrate Brexit, and that the policy of our party and our Front Bench is that we will be leaving the European Union in March 2019?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know how important this is for her constituency, and I can confirm that that has always been our position.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. At least he has allowed someone from this side to make an intervention, which the Secretary of State did not have the decency to do. Will he explain what on earth a meaningful vote would mean if there was a Hobson’s choice Brexit—a choice between the deal we have done or no deal at all? Is not avoiding a Hobson’s choice Brexit what this entire debate is now about?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because it goes to the heart of the issue: If Parliament is given a vote on article 50, and if we do not like what the Prime Minister has brought back, we can have something much worse. Even a child could see that that is not an acceptable choice.

Mr Baron: Perhaps those on the Opposition Benches are missing the central point. In any negotiation, ruling out the possibility of no deal will guarantee the worst outcome. Anyone who has conducted a negotiation in business understands that. If those on the Opposition Benches do not understand it, they are missing the central point.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I have always been curious about this tactic. What will happen at the end of the negotiations if there is no deal is that we will be pushed over a cliff. Volunteering to jump first has never appeared to me to be a great tactic.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will not give way, because I want to complete this answer.

No deal was never a credible threat, and as each day goes past, it becomes less credible. There is no immigration policy of our party and our Front Bench is that we will have a deal, we will not have any arrangements for law and security. It is not a credible threat, and this notion that we have to pretend we are going to do something that is incredible has no bargaining impact.

The third argument against our position is that it somehow passes an advantage to the EU, and it is based on the proposition that, but for this amendment, the Prime Minister would proceed undisturbed on her course to take us out of the EU without a deal—that she would
calmly, and with the full support of this House, head for the cliff of no deal. That seems extremely unlikely. This amendment is about what will happen at the end of the negotiations, not at the beginning. It would allow Parliament to have a meaningful role once the negotiations are over, and it would not tie the Government’s hands during the negotiations. What it would mean, however, is that the course that the Government would take, in the event that article 50 was voted down or that there was no deal, would have to be supported by a majority in this House. Standing back, that looks like common sense.

2.45 pm

It is unthinkable that any Prime Minister would seek to force through a course of action that would have significant consequences for many years which the majority in this House did not approve of. That is unthinkable, and the idea that that is how we would achieve an orderly Brexit is for the birds. The amendment would provide order where there would otherwise be utter chaos and, for those reasons, I urge hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House to support the amendment tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, to preserve Lords amendment 19P.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I beg to move manuscript amendment (b), to leave out from first “19P” to end.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for having enabled this amendment to be considered this afternoon by accepting my manuscript. It is a very odd and, I have to say, unsatisfactory aspect of the way in which our Parliament does its business that we frequently end up on ping-pong debating amendments that are irrelevant to what the House is really troubled about. I have to tell the House that, in order to get to this point, it has been necessary also to twist the rules of procedure in the other place, and I am immensely grateful to those peers who facilitated the manuscript amendment that was tabled there and that has enabled us to consider for the first time this afternoon the issue of the meaningful vote on no deal.

The issue, which has been highlighted by earlier speakers, is about the form that a meaningful vote should take. There are two options in front of the House. The House will recall that, when this matter first arose last week, the amendment that had come from the Lords included a mandatory element. That is constitutionally rather unusual. Indeed, I do not think that it has happened since the civil war in the 17th century, and I do not think that that ended very well. I seem to recall that it ended with Oliver Cromwell saying:

“Take away that fool’s bauble, the mace.”

Because of this, I considered it to be excessive. I apologise to the House that, in trying to produce something else very late at night last week, I probably did not draft it quite as well as I might have done. However, it led to a sensible discussion, prompted by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who had a number of us in her room and said she would do her best to meet the concerns we were expressing on there not being a meaningful vote on no deal.

Last Thursday, it looked as though we were going to reach an agreement based on exactly the terms of the Lords amendment that has come back to us, but at a very late stage, it was indicated to me that the Government did not feel able to proceed with that. I should like to emphasise that I make absolutely no criticism of those with whom I negotiated, who have behaved impeccably in this matter. Indeed, at the end of the day I have to accept that negotiations may sometimes founder at the last minute. However, this was unfortunate, from my point of view, and I will come back to that point in a moment.

Be that as it may, the Government’s tabled amendment was the one that we are being asked to accept today—the one that simply asks us to note and does not give us the opportunity of amending. Two arguments were put to me to justify that change when it occurred and in the negotiations that followed. The first was that there was concern about the justiciability of the amendment. The Standing Orders of the House cannot be impugned in any court outside of this high court of Parliament, but it is right to say that if one puts a reference to the Standing Orders into a statute, that can raise some interesting, if somewhat arcane, legal issues about the extent to which a challenge can be brought. My view is that I do not believe that the amendment, which is currently the Lords amendment that has come to us, is credibly open to challenge. For that matter, I happen to think that the Government amendment is also not credibly open to challenge either, although it is worth pointing out that it is as likely to be challenged or capable of being challenged as the other. I do not accept a differentiation between them.

The second argument was of a very different kind. It was said to me—this was picked up by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman—that the Government had real concerns that this issue, which is one of detail, had acquired such a status with those with whom we were negotiating that it could undermine the Government’s negotiating position in trying to get the United Kingdom the best possible deal for leaving the EU. Now, I must say that I found that difficult to accept based on my own range of contacts and on how I thought that the EU is likely to work. However, it is not an issue that I, as a supporter of the Government, can entirely ignore.

I am very troubled about Brexit. It is well known in this House that I believe that we have made an historic mistake in voting to leave, but I am open minded as to what the best course of action should be and respectful of the decision of the electorate in the referendum result. I dislike very much the extent to which we can be fettered or pushed into frameworks of what we have or have not to accept in that negotiation but that is, if I may so, a reason why I should also give as much latitude to the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister as she indicates to me that she might have.

Mr Baron: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve: No, I wish to conclude.
In those circumstances, there is an issue that I cannot ignore. As the House will have noticed this afternoon, a statement was sent by the Secretary of State that will become a written ministerial statement tomorrow. The first part of it deals with the position of the Speaker and, if I may put it like this, the piquancy of this is that having on the one hand said that an unamendable motion to note is an unamendable motion to note in a statute, the fact is that it really has absolutely no force at all. The reality is that it is part of the Standing Orders of this House, and it is not open to any interpretation in any court and, ultimately, it will be entirely your responsibility, Mr Speaker, to decide what can or should not be treated as a neutral terms motion. Actually, the statement highlights the fact that, although this debate has been about trying to provide assurance—not just in this House, but to many members of the public outside who are worried about the end of this process and what might happen—the truth is that the assurance does not lie in the words of the statute, except in so far as the statute is the word of the Government. The assurance lies in the hands of this House and, in the first part of the statement, in the power of the Speaker.

I then insisted that a second piece be put into the statement, which I will read out. If I may say so, this ought to be blindingly obvious, but it says:

“The Government recognises that it is open for Ministers and members of the House of Commons to table motions on and debate matters of concern and that, as is the convention, parliamentary time will be provided for this.”

If this House chooses to debate matters, including matters on which it may wish to have multiple motions, the reality is that if we wish to exert our power to do that, we can. In the circumstances that might follow a “no deal”, which would undoubtedly be one of the biggest political crises in modern British history, if the House wishes to speak with one voice, or indeed with multiple voices, the House has the power to do so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The bit I do not understand is that many motions have been carried by this House in the past few years—motions tabled by the Backbench Business Committee, by the Opposition and by ordinary Members—but the Government have just let them go through and then completely ignored them. The only thing that has legislative effect is legislation. That is why we must have a meaningful vote, not a pretend one.

Mr Grieve: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right, but if the Government were to concede to the amendment, as drafted in the Lords, for an amendable motion, the House must understand that the Government could ignore it. I can assure the House that it would not be enforceable in any court of law—[Interruption.] No, that really must be understood. It could not be enforceable in any court of law, because that would entirely undermine the rights and privileges of this place. It would be for us to enforce it. Of course, the ultimate sanction that this House has is a motion of no confidence but, short of that, there are other means by which the House can in fact bring its clear view to bear on the Government.

Mr Baron: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve: No, I will not.

In view of that acknowledgement, I must say that I weigh that and the clear words of this statement against what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has told me about her anxieties. My judgment—it is purely personal—is that if that is the issue, having finally obtained, with a little more difficulty than I would have wished, the obvious acknowledgement of the sovereignty of this place over the Executive in black and white language, I am prepared to accept the Government’s difficulty, support them and, in the circumstances, to accept the form of amendment that they want. I shall formally move my amendment at the end, because I do not want to deprive the House of the right to vote if it wishes. Members have the absolute right to disagree, but it seems to me that, with the acknowledgement having been properly made, I am content to go down that route.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve: No, I want to end.

We are facing some real difficulties at the moment. It is rightly said that those whom the gods want to destroy, they first render mad. There is enough madness around at the moment to make one start to question whether collective sanity in this country has disappeared. Every time someone tries to present a sensible reasoned argument in this House vilification and abuse follow, including death threats to right hon. and hon. Friends. There is a hysteria that completely loses sight of the issues that we really have to consider. There is an atmosphere of bullying that has the directly opposite consequence in that people are put into a position where they feel unable to compromise, because by doing so they will be immediately described as having “lost”—as if these were arguments to be lost or won. The issue must be that we get things right.

Right at the other end of the spectrum, we get some other ridiculous things. I have had Daily Mail journalists crawling over the garden of my house in France. I do not quite know, but I think they were looking for silos from which missiles might be aimed at the mansion of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). The area where I have a holiday home has a history of monsters and witches chucking megaliths backwards and forwards across the channel. Such is the state of our discourse, and that is the very thing we must avoid. We are going to have differences and, if there is no deal, those differences may extend to my taking a different view, as a Member of Parliament, from what the Government might wish. This House has a right to act if there is no deal in order to protect the interests of the British people, and the responsibility in those circumstances lies as much with us as it does with the Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I very gently point out that we have less than 45 minutes, and I do want to accommodate other Back-Bench Members.

3 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to take part in this debate.
Once again, we will be hearing the siren voices of the hard-line no deal Brexiteers, of whom there are some in this place, claiming that they, and they alone, have a monopoly on respect for democracy, on respect for Parliament and on a patriotic love for their chosen country.

They will demonstrate their regard for democracy by unilaterally and retrospectively changing the question that was asked in the 2016 referendum while assuming that the answer will stay the same. They demonstrate their respect for Parliament by doing their damnedest to keep Parliament out of playing any meaningful role in the most important events of any of us is likely to live through. And they demonstrate their patriotic love for their country by pushing an agenda that threatens to fundamentally damage the social and economic foundations on which their country, and indeed all of our respective countries, was built.

There should be no doubt about what the hard-liners are seeking to achieve here. They tell us that the Lords amendments are about attempting to stop Brexit but, in their private briefings to each other, they tell themselves they are worried that these amendments might stop a cliff-edge no deal Brexit—that is precisely what I want these amendments to stop.

The hard-liners are seeking to create a situation where, if, as seems increasingly likely by the day, a severely weakened Prime Minister—possibly in the last days of her prime ministership—comes back from Brussels with a miserable deal that nobody could welcome, the only option is to crash out of the European Union with no agreement on anything.

Although I hear the Secretary of State’s words of warning that a person should not go into a negotiation if they cannot afford to walk away, I remind him that the Government started to walk away on the day they sent their article 50 letter. From that date they had no deal, and the negotiation is about trying to salvage something from the wreckage of that disastrous mistake.

The far-right European Research Group would have us believe that its opposition to amendment 19P is just about preventing Parliament from being allowed to tell the Government what to do. I am no expert in English history, but I thought the civil war was about whether Parliament has the right to tell the monarch and the Government what to do.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Parliament finds itself in a very strange position? This Parliament actually does not want to have a vote. In fact, I think it voted not to have a vote. Even if it does not want to have a vote, it is still legitimate to have a vote. Not to have a vote is a bizarre dereliction of responsibility by this Parliament, which is why we need Scottish independence and not the mess and the carnage we see before us.

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The reason why some in this House are determined not to give Parliament a meaningful vote is that they are worried an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians on both sides of the House might vote against the cliff-edge scenario they have already plotted for us.

But the real reason why some Government Members, and even one or two Opposition Members, are acting now to block the chance of this so-called sovereign Parliament to have any powers on this whatsoever is that they know that if they put their true agenda before the House, in all probability it would be greeted by a majority that is numbered in the hundreds, rather than in the tens or the dozens.

They say the Government have to be protected at all costs from Parliament, because Parliament might do something the Government do not like. Is that not what Parliaments are for, especially a Parliament in which the Government have lost their democratic mandate to form a majority Government by their cynical calling of an unnecessary and disruptive election?

The Prime Minister has asked us not to accept the Lords amendments because she does not want to have her hands tied. It is none of my business whether the Prime Minister likes having her hands, her feet or anything else tied, but surely the whole point of having a Parliament is so there is somebody with democratic credibility and democratic accountability to keep the Government in check when it is clear to everyone that they are going in the wrong direction. If plunging over a cliff edge is not the wrong direction, I do not know what is.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Although the hon. Gentleman says it is none of his business whether the Prime Minister has her hands, her feet or anything else tied, does he accept it is in the interest of the country for the Prime Minister to have the freedom to go and negotiate the best deal for the country? Parliament cannot negotiate the detail of that deal. Only the Prime Minister can do that.

Peter Grant: These amendments contain no desire for Parliament to be involved in the negotiations, but we are being asked to believe there is no possibility that the negotiations will fail. That is what we are being asked to believe, except some of those who give us that promise are hoping the negotiations will fail, because some of them have already decided that they want to push for a no deal Brexit, despite the calamitous consequences outlined by the Secretary of State.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree this appears to have more to do with trying to hold the Tory party together—Tory Members are negotiating among themselves as we speak—rather than for the benefit of the whole United Kingdom?

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes a valid point. In fact, it is worth remembering that the only reason we had a referendum was to bring the Tory party together. That worked out well, didn’t it?

The reason why some Government Members get so hot under the collar about the danger of giving Parliament a meaningful vote is that, if the House approves something, rather than simply considering it, they claim it could subsequently be used as the basis for a legal challenge. I will not gainsay the words of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) but, interestingly, both of the cases the Government quote in their document to prove that a meaningful vote could lead to a legal challenge resulted in rulings that actions of the House,
whether they are a resolution, a Committee decision or an order of Parliament, do not have the status of an Act of Parliament. Interestingly, one of the cases was about a pornography publisher who sued *Hansard* for damaging his reputation as a publisher.

The ERG briefing contains a dark, dark warning about what could happen if the Government lose a vote at the end of the negotiating process. The briefing says it could undermine the Government’s authority and position. In fact, in the briefing’s exact words:

“This could produce an unstable zombie Government.”

The briefing gives no indication as to how any of us would be able to tell the difference. The real giveaway is the third of the three “practical problems” the briefing sees with amendment 19P:

“It effectively seeks to take no deal off the table.”

That is the real agenda here. I want no deal off the table, and the Secretary of State does not want no deal, so why is it still on the table? The intention is that under no circumstances will Parliament have the right to pull us back from the cliff edge. It is not just about keeping no deal on the table; it is about making sure that, by the time we come to make the decision, there is nothing on the table other than no deal.

In my younger days, which I can vaguely remember, I used to be a keen amateur mountaineer, and I loved reading books about mountaineering and hill walking. One book I read was an account of the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865. Unlike some cliff edges, the Matterhorn did not have safety barriers. Edward Whymper and his six companions got to the summit, but during the descent four of the party fell over a cliff to their deaths after the rope holding the group together broke. There were suggestions of foul play and murder most foul, but the rope just had not been strong enough. If it had not broken, it is likely that all seven would have been killed. There are hard-line Brexiteers in this House who are determined to drag us over the cliff edge. I want Parliament to be allowed to erect a safety barrier, not to stop those who want to get to the bottom of the cliff reaching their destination, but to make sure that anybody who gets there is in one piece. As I have made clear before, I have no intention of usurping the democratic right of the people of England to take good or bad decisions for themselves, but no one has the right to usurp the democratic decisions of the people of Scotland. Let me remind the Government, once again, that if they seek to drag their people over the cliff edge, our people are not going to follow. The Government will find that there is not a rope in existence strong enough to hold Scotland to their country if their country seeks to take us over that cliff edge.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: With immediate effect, a four-minute limit on Back-Benches speeches will apply.

Philip Davies: First, let me say that I very much agree with my right hon. and learned Friend for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about the nature of political debate in this country. He is absolutely right to point that out and I agree with him wholeheartedly.

The second point I wish to make is that many people in this House seem to forget that there have been two meaningful votes. The first was when this House decided to give a referendum to the British people. The second was the referendum itself, in which the people voted to leave the EU. They were meaningful votes.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Philip Davies: I am not going to give way, because time is limited. Since then, some people who did not like the result of that referendum and perhaps did not even expect it have had a new-found enthusiasm for the rights of this Parliament to decide all sorts of things. They were quite happy for all of these powers to be given over to the EU willy-nilly, but they now have this new-found enthusiasm that this House should decide everything.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—

Philip Davies: I am not going to give way. As I was saying, if only that had been the case before. I excuse from this my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), because he did not vote to have a referendum and so there is absolutely no reason why he should feel in any way bound by its result. I perfectly respect that; his position has been entirely consistent. What I have no time for—

Mr Kenneth Clarke: To make it clear, this totally irrelevant argument that we are trying to reverse the referendum is as irrelevant to me as it is to any other of my right hon. and hon. Friends. This House voted, by an enormous majority, to invoke article 50. We are now trying to debate, and have parliamentary influence over, what we are going to do when we have left and what the form of our new arrangements with Europe and the rest of the world will be. So will my hon. Friend stop, yet again, introducing—this is not just him, but he is the ultimate Member to do it—this totally irrelevant argument and try to say what is wrong with the process set out in the Lords amendment? What is the excessive power that it apparently gives this House to have a say when the negotiations are finished?

Philip Davies: I am afraid that the public are not fooled by the motives of people who clearly want to delay, frustrate or overturn the result of the referendum. It is a shame some of them cannot admit it. The shadow Secretary of State said that people had said over a long period of time that if we did this or that, Brexit will be frustrated. May I just suggest to him that he gets out of London, because people around the country feel that Brexit is being frustrated? It is already being frustrated a great deal by this House. So he has this idea that Brexit has not been frustrated, but he needs to get—

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): How?

Philip Davies: My right hon. Friend, who has taken a vow of independence since he lost his job as a Minister—he had never shown this before—asks how. I would invite him to get out—[Interruption.] He is welcome to come up to Yorkshire—

Mr Vaizey: I go there frequently.

Philip Davies: He should speak to people then. I am perfectly content for this House to vote on whether it wants to accept the deal negotiated by the Government that they come back with. It is absolutely right that this
[Philip Davies]

House votes on whether or not to accept that deal, and the Government should accept the vote of this House. What it cannot do, having decided to give the people a vote in a referendum, is find some strange parliamentary mechanism in order to frustrate and overturn the result—

3.15 pm

Mr Grieve: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: My right hon. and learned Friend did not give way, and I am not going to give way either because time is limited. Parliament cannot vote to reverse the decision of the referendum. People outside this House need to know very clearly today that—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: I am not going to give way, as there is no time. I want people outside this House to know that those who are voting for this “meaningful vote” today mean that if the Government decide that no deal is better than a bad deal—[Interruption.] Does it not show how out of touch this place is that “no deal is better than a bad deal”? Is it a statement of the blindingly obvious, but amazingly some people find contentious.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies: I am not giving way, because I want to let other people have time to speak. Members should bear that in mind. I have given way to the Father of the House. I appreciate that my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) does not like hearing arguments with which she disagrees, but I am going to plough on regardless, despite her chuntering from a sedentary position. The fact that no deal is better than a bad deal is blindingly obvious to anyone with even a modicum of common sense. People in this House are being invited to accept that if the Government decide that no deal is better than a bad deal, this House should somehow be able to say to them, “You’ve got to continue being a member of the European Union while you go back and renegotiate this and renegotiate that.” I cannot stand aside and allow that to happen, and I do not think the British people will thank anybody in this House who votes that way. Let nobody be in any doubt: the constituents of anybody who votes for this meaningful vote today should know that they are voting to try to keep us in the European Union, against their will.

Hilary Benn: May I say to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that the argument he has just advanced is not true? I believe a very small number of Members of the House would cheerfully jump over the edge of a no-deal cliff, which is why we are having this argument this afternoon.

The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), for whom I have enormous respect, is right when he says that this is a very fraught, difficult and tense debate, where passions are running high. Given that the referendum split the country right down the middle, that is not entirely surprising. I gently say to him that, given the experience he went through last week, when he thought he had an assurance and then discovered that he did not, if I were him, I would be very, very cautious about accepting further assurances. However, I respect the decision that he makes.

I would be cautious for the reason I put my question to the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place. I listened carefully to what he said and I heard no explanation, no justification and no argument for why the Government are prepared for the House to debate an amendable motion to approve the withdrawal agreement—that is what he indicated when he came before the Select Committee—yet, when it comes to deciding what takes place in the event that the nation is facing the prospect of no deal, they are insisting on having a motion in “neutral terms”. That may or may not allow the Speaker to come to the rescue of the House by allowing the motion to be declared amendable. However, as I read Standing Order 24B, as long as the Government do their job in drafting the motion, the Speaker will have no choice but to declare it a motion in “neutral terms” and it will therefore not be amendable.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does not this compromise give enormous power to you, Mr Speaker? That is all very well, because you are a Speaker who has stood up for the rights of this House and of Back Benchers, and for the majority in this House to be able to have meaningful votes, but were you to fall under a bus in the next few months, what guarantee would there be that a future Speaker would stand up for the rights of this House in the same way that you have done?

Mr Speaker: I will do my best to observe the road safety code.

Hilary Benn: It is not for me to advise you, Mr Speaker, but please do not cross any roads between now and the end of this process.

It seems to me that the Government’s intention throughout has been to seek to neuter this House when we come to the end of the process. We are talking about the possibility of facing no deal at all. In his speech from our Front Bench, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) set the position out very clearly: first, not only would we be facing economic difficulty of the most serious kind—with impacts on trade, on our services industry and on broadcasting—but there would be impacts on the security of our nation, because with no deal in place, how would the exchange of information continue? These are not minor matters; they go to the heart of the Government’s responsibility to make sure that we are safe, that industry works, that taxes are raised and that public services are paid for. That is why people are getting exercised about this. It is not just some amendment to one Bill; it is the most important decision that the country has faced for generations.

As my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out, we are not ready to cope with the consequences. Members should contemplate this, for a moment: if, because the House cannot do anything about it, we fall off the edge of the cliff, and future generations look at us and say, “What did you do at that moment? What did you do? Didn’t you say anything?” , are we, as the House of
Commons, really going to allow our hands to be bound to do so. If necessary, I will join with him in doing just that.

**Mr Grieve:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that, if he looks at the Standing Orders, he will see that, if the House wants to take charge at that point, it will be able to do so. If necessary, I will join with him in doing just that.

**Hilary Benn:** I absolutely bow to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's expertise, but I am afraid that, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras pointed out earlier, under this Government, we have sat on these Benches on too many occasions, time and time and time again, on which the House has used the Standing Orders to debate a matter and pass a motion but the Government have sat there and said, “We’re not taking any notice of you whatsoever.” That is why the opportunity to ensure that we have the right to amend a motion is, in the next few minutes, in the hands of this House. There will be no further opportunity to take back control, so I hope the House will do so by voting in favour of the amendment of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I urge Members to help each other.

**Antoinette Sandbach (Edgstock):** I am grateful, again, to the other place for sending us the amendment. I have been concerned about this issue since the referendum, and have been open in my views about the need for a meaningful vote and parliamentary sovereignty. This is about our country's future and ensuring that we enhance, not reduce, our democracy. When I was re-elected last year, my constituents were under no illusions about how important I thought a meaningful vote was, as I had already made my concerns public and, indeed, voted for such a vote during the article 50 process.

Views may differ regarding the desirability of no deal. In my view, it would be utterly catastrophic for my constituents and the industries in which they work, but surely all sides should welcome the certainty that the amendment would bring to the process. We are often accused of wanting to tie the Government's hands, but nothing could be further from the truth. How can the amendment tie the Government's hands during negotiations when it concerns the steps that should be taken when negotiations have broken down? In other words, it concentrates on events after the negotiations.

**Philip Davies rose—**

I support the Government's negotiation and strongly believe that the Prime Minister will succeed in her negotiation. However, it would be irresponsible not to have a process in place for what will happen should negotiations collapse. What is more, the amendment would ensure that, when the Prime Minister sits down to negotiate, our European partners know that she does so with the full backing of Parliament. Far from binding the Prime Minister, it would strengthen her hand. I encourage all my colleagues to recognise that the amendment would empower both Parliament and our negotiators. It lays out a contingency should disaster strike, and it delivers on the commitment to take back control to Parliament.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. A three-minute limit will now apply.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for selecting amendment (a); my pleasure at being able to speak to it is enhanced by the fact that this opportunity came completely out of the blue, and I welcome that.

The principal purpose of my amendment is to provide clarity such that in all eventualities there will be the opportunity for people to have a final say on any deal that the Government strike, and such that Parliament will not be left stranded with no deal, with which would come the closure of our ports, food shortages, medicine shortages and general chaos. If Government Members do not believe that, I advise them to talk to the people at the port authority at Dover to hear what they think no deal would mean. I make no apology for the fact that I do want to stop Brexit, which I do not think will come as a surprise to many people in the Chamber. I do not, though, believe that the amendment tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), or, indeed, my own amendment, would achieve that aim.

Brexit is a calamity. We are going to be poorer, more insecure and less influential, with fewer friends in the world and more enemies as a result of it, and that is happening already. Some Government Members know that and say it; some know it and keep quiet; and some know it and claim the opposite, although I am not going to embarrass those who shared platforms with me during the EU referendum campaign and said then that it would cause calamity, but now claim the opposite. Some Government Members deny it. Their life's ambition has been to achieve Brexit and they could not possibly accept that it is now doing us harm.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The right hon. Gentleman is making a fine speech. To put some numbers on this calamity, a no-deal Brexit would cause an 8% damage-event to GDP. For context, the 2008 crash was a 2% damage-event to GDP. The over-the-cliff Brexiteers are looking to damage the UK economy four times as much as the 2008 crash did. Well done, guys!

**Tom Brake:** Absolutely. We understand the calamity that would be no deal. I think that nobody here or in the European Union believes that the Government would actually settle for that, because of the consequences that it would have for our economy.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath):** I will just make a bit more progress in the minute and a half that is left.

There would be, if time allowed, a chorus of the “will of the people” from the Government Benches, but let me make two points about that. Two years on from 23 June 2016, who is clear about what the will of the
people now is? The whole purpose of providing a final say on the deal is to test whether the will of the people is the same now as it was two years ago.

As Members of Parliament, are we delegates or representatives? We are elected to use our judgment, from the Prime Minister downwards, who campaigned to remain because she used her judgment and thought that Brexit would cause us damage and would damage our communities up and down the country. Many Conservative Members used their judgment then. I am afraid that their judgment now seems to have left them. The Government’s own assessment confirms that the impact of Brexit will be wholly negative.

Therefore, the delegates in this House will push on with a policy that is detrimental to British families. The representatives in this House will recognise that a way out of this ideological nightmare into which we have got ourselves has to be found. Today, we will be able to decide and to demonstrate which of those two things we are—delegates or representatives.

3.30 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) got it absolutely right in his response to the Chairman of the Brexit Committee that the constitutional power of this House to determine who is in Government is entirely unaffected by these amendments or the written ministerial statement that will be laid tomorrow. The powers, the authority and the rights of this House remain intact, and that is not dependent on whether a meaningful vote is amendable or unamendable.

Mr Speaker, as an historian of this House and its powers, you know perfectly well that the Norway debate or not it should adjourn for the Whitsun recess. That was held on the Adjournment of the House—whether or not it should adjourn for the Whitsun recess. That great issue of the time—whether we should have a few days off at Whitsun—led to a fundamental change in the Government and the whole history of our nation that flowed from it.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do apologise to the hon. Lady, but I will not give way, because other people want to speak, and time is very short.

Therefore, the rights of this House are intact. The legislation will ensure that the Government can pursue their objectives, which is very important. The Chief Whip is in his place. I commend him for the tactful way that he has discussed these issues with so many people over the past week to ensure that we could come to something that every Conservative Member is able to agree to and put their name to that maintains the privileges of this House, ensures that the Government can negotiate properly, and sends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to the negotiating table with a united House of Commons behind them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today. I will make just a couple of remarks.

I want to reiterate the comments that have been made that this is not about reversing Brexit or about tying the hands of the Government. This is about what happens and the role of Parliament if things go wrong. It is about clarity, about what will happen in this Parliament and to the interests of our country in the event of no deal, or no deal being agreed by this House.

It is incredibly disappointing to have reached this position. It could have been so different. A week after the referendum, I wrote to the then Prime Minister. I then wrote to the current Prime Minister. I made the argument that it was in the interests of our country that this House came together, that we had ways of working across parties, across this House and the House of Lords, and that we came to a solution together and worked through the issues together. But, step by step, we have seen a Government who have run and a Government who have hidden—a Government who have not even wanted to bring forward their own impact assessments so that we can take part in an evidence-based debate on the impact of Brexit on our country and get the answer right. A process by which this country comes together is essential if, in the autumn, we reach a situation in which what was unthinkable becomes thinkable. To have a way in which we handle that is our responsibility.

Every large Government project has a risk register and a response to those risks. This is a critical risk for our country and it is vital that, in advance of such a situation, we all know what is going to happen and that we have a say, on behalf of our constituents, about what could be an incredibly catastrophic situation for our economy, our country and our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to accommodate further speakers.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I shall make the shortest speech here that I have made for very many years—[Hon. Members: “Ever!”]—and I shall take no interventions. [Interruption.] Well, the Government are restricting debate on this European issue as ferociously as they are trying to restrict votes and powers. I voted against both the previous timetable motions. With no explanation, we have been told that we have an hour and a half for this extremely important issue today. Presumably, it is to allow time for the interesting debate that follows, taking note on the subject of NATO, which could be tabled at any time over the next fortnight and has no urgency whatever. None of us are allowed to say very much about this matter.

The Government have been trying to minimise the parliamentary role throughout the process. That is only too obvious. I will try to avoid repeating anything that others have said, but the fact is that it started with an attempt to deny the House any vote on the invocation of article 50, and litigation was required to change that. A meaningful vote has been resisted since it was first proposed. The Government suffered a defeat in this House during the earlier stages of our proceedings before they would contemplate it, and then they assured us that they would not try to reverse that; there would be a meaningful vote. But actually, because that amendment needs amplification and the Bill needs to be made clearer, we now have this vital last stage of Lords amendments and the final attempt to spell out
what meaningful votes and parliamentary influence are supposed to mean, and it is being resisted to the very last moment.

Last week, I thought that the Government would be defeated because of their resistance. I was not invited to the negotiations. I do not blame the Chief Whip for that in the slightest. I have not fallen out with him personally, but I think that he knew that I would take a rather firm line as I saw nothing wrong with Lord Hailsham’s amendment if nothing else were available. My right hon. and hon. Friends, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), actually believed that they had undertakings from the Prime Minister, and I believe that the Prime Minister gave those undertakings in good faith.

My right hon. and learned Friend for Beaconsfield negotiated with a very distinguished member of the Government acting on the Prime Minister’s behalf, and they reached a firm agreement. That agreement is substantially reflected in Lords amendment 19P and my right hon. and hon. Friends expected that it would be tabled by the Government. It was not. And now the Government are resisting the very issue upon which last week a very distinguished member of the Government reached a settlement—to use the legal terms—because the Government are not able to live up to their agreement. We are being asked to substitute, for a perfectly reasonable Lords amendment, a convoluted thing that would mean arguments about the Speaker’s powers if it ever had to be invoked.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): There are only two issues that come out of this debate. The first is about honour. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) tried to ensure that he got a deal from the Prime Minister. He went with other Members to negotiate with her and she made a promise to him about an amendment, but that promise was not necessarily fulfilled in the interpretation of the Members who heard her say it, so the House of Lords had to send this issue back to us today. This issue is definitely about honour. Other hon. Members have said that they believe that the House can pass resolutions and motions, and that they will be honoured, even if they are not necessarily binding. I believe that the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield is an honourable man, and he is again taking the Government at their word.

That brings me to the second issue, which is that this is also about Parliament. If the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield has achieved anything, it is that he has moved the Government from where the Prime Minister was on “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday, when she said that Parliament cannot tie the hands of Government. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) tried to ensure that the Government reached a settlement—to use the legal terms—because the Government were resisting the very issue upon which last week a very distinguished member of the Government reached a settlement. I disagree with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who said that the vote in 1940 was on the Adjournment. It was not—it was on whether this House should adjourn for a successive number of days, and it was an amendable motion that would have had effect.

Mr Rees-Mogg rose—

Chris Bryant: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman if he does not mind. [Interruption.] Oh, all right.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I said that the vote was on the Whitsun recess, so I think that I covered that point.

Chris Bryant: But the hon. Gentleman managed to elide the fact that it was an amendable motion that had effect.

The point is that if the Government do what their motion says they should do—namely, table a neutral motion—the written ministerial statement gives the Speaker no power whatever to decide that it is not neutral. Indeed, if a Speaker were to decide that a neutral motion was suddenly, somehow or other, not neutral and could be amended, we should remove him from the Chair because he would not be abiding by the Standing Orders of this House. So let us make it absolutely clear: if it is a neutral motion, it will be a motion that has no meaning whatever.

Anna Soubry: I am concerned that the editor of the Daily Mail has made a small doll that looks like me and is sticking pins in its throat, as every time I want to...
[Anna Soubry]
speak. I get this wretched infection. However, I want to make some very important points.
I completely agree with all the arguments advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). History will recall what a remarkably brave woman she has been throughout all of this. I, too, will vote for the amendment, because I agree with much of what has been said: this needs to be in statute. I pay real tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who has yet again shown outstanding leadership and courage, as indeed have many Members of the House of Lords. It is in tribute to them, if nothing else, that I shall vote for this amendment. But primarily I shall vote for it because it is in the interests of all my constituents. I was elected to come here to represent all of them, including the 53% who did not vote for me, and the 48% who voted to remain, who have been sidelined and abused. The big mistake that we have made, from the outset of all that has followed from the referendum result, is that we have not included them.
Finally, I say gently to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that he has to remember that no hon. Members will vote with the Government today as an act of faith and trust in the Prime Minister that the sort of comment he made will no longer exist in today as an act of faith and trust in the Prime Minister and that we will be more united. It is her role, if I may say so, to make sure that we have more temperate speeches.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), I hold the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in very high regard for his integrity and fluency. I do, however, say gently that he is in danger of turning into a modern-day grand old Duke of York. There are only so many times you can march the troops up the hill and down again without losing integrity completely. In the little time remaining, I want to talk about neutral motions, which are at the centre of this dispute—

3.45 pm
One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).
The Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G), That manuscript amendment (b) be made.
The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 319.

Division No. 191] [3.45 pm]

AYES
Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
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
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Etson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollob, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Ian
Lee, Karen

Reeves, Rachel
Reeves, Ellie
Rees, Christina
Rees, Sandy
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Sididi, Tuilip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smith, Kylie
Sobol, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Tiggw, Derek
Tiggw, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Urnunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Jeff Smith and    
Nick Smith

Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Bin
Afryie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolso, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Bretonet, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Corti, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine

NOES

Double, Steve
Downer, 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, Mr Nigel
Evelynn, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
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, rh Sir Graham
Hair, Kirstene
Halloween, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoe, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Birk
Holloway, Adam
Howell, Jonathan
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunter, Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Jackson, James
Margot
Javid, Mr Saajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Mrs Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mr Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadbeater, Mr Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, Mr Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Mr Brandon
Lewis, Mr Dr Julian
Liddell-Grange, Mr Ian
Liddington, Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, John
Mann, Mr Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Mr Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Mr Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Mrs Maria
Milking, Amanda
Mills, Nick
Milton, Mr Anne
Mitchell, Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Mr Penny
Morgan, Mr Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Mr David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Mr Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
O’Donnell, Mr David
O’Connor, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Pater, Mr Priti
Paterson, Mr Dr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mr Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Mr Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Mr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mr Gavin
Robinson, Mr Dr Julian
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Mr Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, Dr Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, Mr Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, Dr David
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Mr Mike
Smith, Mr Dr John
Smith, Mr Julian
Smith, Mr Dr Royston
Soames, Mr Sir Nicholas
Spelman, Mr Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Mr Iain
Stewart, Mr Rory
Stride, Mr Mel
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, Mr Sir Desmond
Swire, Mr Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Mr Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Mr Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Mr Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tristram, Mr David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, Mrs Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Mr Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Mr Martin
Villiers, Mr Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheelwright, Mr Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr Mr John
Wiggin, Mr Bill
Williamson, Mr George
Wilson, Mr Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, Mr Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Stuart Andrew and
Andrew Stephenson

**Question accordingly negatived.**

The Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

**Main Question put and agreed to.**

Lords amendments 19C to 19E, and 19G to 19L agreed to.

Government amendments made to Lords amendment 19P.

Lords amendment 19P, as amended, agreed to.

Lords amendments 4B to 4E, 24C, and 110B to 110J agreed to.

4.5 pm

**Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What means do I have to correct the record given that at Prime Minister’s questions today, my neighbour, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), may have inadvertently cited my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Transport as being responsible for a timetabling issue that affects my constituency? The emails that she referenced were three years old, from a time when neither of my right hon. Friends were in their current roles. The timetabling issue and the current disruption are separate issues. I will continue to work with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that the best service for my constituents is met. I felt that it was important to bring this point to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise this attempted point of order, upon which the sagacious advice of the senior procedural adviser of the House is, forgive me, that it was not much of a point of order. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman is not in a small minority in that regard. If it is any comfort to him, I can assure him that in my 21 years’ experience in the House, the vast majority of points of order are bogus.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): You used to do it!

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman suggests that I used to do it. I do not remember that, but if I did, all I would say to him is that that was then, and this is now.
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) was as shocked as I was to read the content of many of the emails that were released both to him and to me under the Freedom of Information Act. Their content has had such serious implications for my constituents and his. Given that the Department has not released emails during the current Secretary of State for Transport’s tenure and has stopped at the point at which the current Secretary of State was appointed, I wonder whether I could seek your guidance as to whether it might be in order to direct the Secretary of State to release those emails and come clean about what he knew, and when.

Mr Speaker: I do not think it is open to me to issue any direction of the kind that the hon. Lady suggests, but the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) made his point in all sincerity and it is on the record. Now the hon. Lady, who is at least equally dextrous, has made her own point in her own way and it is on the record—I rather imagine that each of them will rely on those words, as doubtless they co-operate in future on this important matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Very dextrous.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) now basks in the glory of approval from a Member who is in his 40th year of consecutive service in the House, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

NATO

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NATO.

As we look around this Chamber, we see plaques on the walls, such as that of Major Ronald Cartland, killed in action during the retreat to Dunkirk; Lieutenant Colonel Somerset Arthur Maxwell, who died of wounds received at the battle of El Alamein; and Captain George Grey, killed in action fighting in Normandy. These are just some of the men who served as Members in this House who lost their lives defending our country in the second world war. They remind us of the sacrifice that people have made so that we can enjoy the freedoms and democracy of today.

They are only a small number, however, of those from every part of the country and the Commonwealth who gave everything to save our nation from one of the greatest threats it had ever faced. It is all too easy to forget the price they paid. We in this House have never been in a situation in which the actual existence of our country has been called into question. While the sacrifice and service of so many delivered victory in 1945, however, we should not forget either that Britain continued facing a real and enduring danger after that moment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is stronger than that, is it not? Ronald Cartland was at Cassel, on the corner between Dunkirk and Calais, when the evacuation was happening at Dunkirk. They stayed at Cassel knowing they would almost certainly lose their lives if they stayed the extra day. It is a phenomenal sacrifice they made. They knew death was coming and yet they were able to stand there to protect others.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. It is difficult to articulate or convey in a speech the sacrifice that was made, not just by one but by many, in order that we might have what we have today. The sacrifice, the commitment and the dedication, not just of those in the past but of those who continue to serve in our armed forces today, are so often forgotten by all of us. That is why we all in the House have a special duty towards them.

After the second world war, we still could not take peace and stability for granted, and it was then that we turned to NATO and the tens of thousands of British servicemen and women who stepped up to protect our nation from new threats. Had Ernest Bevin not set out his vision of a joint western military strategy and helped to sell the idea to the United States and other nation states, it is doubtful that NATO would have been born. And had it not been for the willingness of Clement Attlee’s Government to support the idea and the continued backing of successive Conservative and Labour Governments, this great strategic military alliance would never have got off the ground, let alone grown and matured into the great military alliance that has protected us for almost 70 years.

It is well worth reminding ourselves what NATO has achieved in the decades since its birth. It has consolidated the post-world war two transatlantic link. It has prevented the re-emergence of conflicts that had dogged Europe
for centuries. It has led operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan. What would have happened if NATO had not held firm during the bitter chill of the cold war? Would the Berlin Wall still stand, casting its shadow over the west? Would millions still be living free, secure and prosperous lives? Even as we enter a new age of warfare, NATO continues to adapt to the times.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the appropriate way in which he has framed this debate, and it is true that NATO played and continues to play an irreplaceable role in the security of the west, but it faces immense challenges, which I know he will come to in his speech, not only from without but from within. One of them is its inability to transform itself fast enough in the face of current challenges, which are quite outside anything it has ever faced before and for which it is remarkably ill equipped. Does he agree, therefore, that it is incumbent on the Governments of the 29 members to make it a part of the 2018 NATO summit that transformation must proceed apace and that the political and military will of those Governments must be reflected in those decisions?

**Gavin Williamson**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we do not change not just our military structures to ensure that they can best respond, but the political structures to which the military structures will turn to be given their direction—if we do not change, if we do not reform, if we do not have the agility to respond to the enemies that this nation and our allies face—NATO will be an organisation that is found wanting.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): The presence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Chamber, just before he ran out of the door—[Hon. Members: “He is here!”]—prompts me to raise with the Secretary of State the question of funding. Will he reconfirm the notion that our contribution of 2% of GDP is not a target but an absolute floor, and that if we are to stand true with our friends in NATO we must aim for 2.5% or 3%, because otherwise we will simply not be able to do what we are seeking to do in the world?

**Gavin Williamson**: With my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer peering at me from behind the Speaker’s Chair, I feel that I must be on my very best behaviour.

We have always seen 2% as a floor, and spending on defence has varied over the years. I think that when the Government came to office it was at a slightly higher level than 2%. Indeed, I think that when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was Secretary of State for Defence it stood at 2.3% and 2.4%, but that took account of the operations in which we were involved in Afghanistan.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): Was my right hon. Friend talking about a flaw or a floor? [Laughter]

**Gavin Williamson**: As we see it, 2% is very much a floor: a base on which to build. We can be very proud to be one of the few nations in NATO that meet the 2% commitment, and we can be exceptionally proud of the work done under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon)—and, of course, that of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor before he moved to the Foreign Office—in establishing that all NATO members needed to spend more.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): There are various metrics by which our peacetime defence investment can be measured, one of which is how it compares with spending on other high-expenditure departmental matters such as health, education and welfare. Does my right hon. Friend recall that as recently as the 1980s, we were spending roughly the same on defence as we were spending on health and education? I am not saying we should repeat that, but given that we are spending two and half times as much on education as we spend on defence, and four times as much on health—and that was before the recent rise—does he not believe that defence has fallen a bit too far down the scale of our national priorities?

**Gavin Williamson**: I could see the excitement on the Chancellor’s face as my right hon. Friend outlined his proposals. I was not sure whether it constituted agreement that we should be setting those targets, but I am sure that we shall have to negotiate on the issue over a long period.

We must ensure that NATO is adapting—and continues to adapt—to the times, and also to the threats that it faces. Since its creation, we have always seen Britain leading from the front. Not only do we assign our independent nuclear deterrent to the defence of the alliance, as we have for the past 60 years, but our service personnel and defence civilians are on the ground in Eastern Europe at this very moment, providing a deterrence against Russian aggression.

It has been my privilege to see their dedication and devotion to duty in Estonia, where we are leading a multinational battalion, and in Poland where they are supporting the United States forces. And at the same time our sailors are commanding half of NATO’s standing naval forces, and our pilots, ground crew, and aircraft have returned to the Black sea region, based in Romania, to police the skies of our south-eastern European allies. Just last year UK forces led the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and we became the first ally to deliver cyber-capabilities in support of NATO operations.

Meanwhile, UK personnel form a critical part of NATO’s command structure. So I am proud that the UK will be sending more than 100 additional UK personnel to bolster that command structure, taking our total to well over 1,000. As we look at the emerging threats and the challenges our nation faces going forward, it is clear that we must make sure that NATO has the resources: that it has the capability and the people to man those command structures, in order for us to meet those threats.

NATO needs the extra support to deal with the growing threats. The dangers we face are multiplying all the time and come from every direction. We are confronting a host of new threats from extremism to cyber-warfare, dangers global in nature that require an international response and a global presence. We are witnessing the rise of rogue states conducting proxy wars and causing regional instability, while old threats are returning.
Russia is a case in point. Back in 2010 Russia was not clearly identified as a threat. The focus of our attention was ungoverned spaces such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but by 2015 the emergence of new threats was becoming apparent to everyone and this threat has accelerated and increased over the last three years.

In 2010 our Royal Navy was called on just once to respond to a Russian naval ship approaching UK territorial waters; last year it was called on 33 times. Russian submarine activity has increased tenfold in the north Atlantic, to a level not seen since the cold war. The Russians are also investing in new technology, through which they aim to outpace our capability. They are concentrating on our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and we must be realistic and accept that we are going to have to invest in new capabilities to deal with these new threats.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a re-emergence of a peer-on-peer threat, and while some great new pieces of kit are now entering service with our Army, Navy and Air Force, does he agree that the pace of their arrival and the new capabilities that will augment them will not be swift enough as we make sure we are capable once again of fighting against our peers, not just mounting counter-insurgency operations?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the pace and delivery of both the new equipment and the support we give our armed forces is important. We must make sure they get that new equipment, that new kit and that new capability as swiftly as we can.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On the issue of the Brussels summit, while it is true that NATO is inestimably more important in collective defence than the European Union, Europe’s nascent defence capability has nevertheless shown itself to have some utility. When we leave the European Union, what will our response be to things that have worked, such as Operation Atalanta and the EU battle groups, of which the UK has been an important part?

Gavin Williamson: We have always been clear that the interests of European security are very much our interests. That was the case before we joined the European Union and it will certainly be the case after we leave. We are open to discussions about how we can continue to work with our European partners—working and leading, if and when that is appropriate. We must not underestimate our capability compared with that of other European nations. We are at the leading edge. We are one of the very few European nations that can lead operations and make a real difference. We recognise the fact that, as we leave the European Union, we want good strong relationships in terms not only of operations but of defence strategy, procurement and industrial strategy. We will continue to work closely with the European Union.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): My constituency is home to Astrium, which is involved in the Galileo project, and to MBDA, which manufactures Brimstone, Sea Ceptor and a variety of other products that keep our country safe. This shows the strength of bilateral relationships and the importance of procurement. Is the Secretary of State confident that that will continue to happen?

Gavin Williamson: I am confident that we will be able to reach agreement on how we move forward. We must not forget that 90% of the defence industry relationships we have with other European nations are bilateral, rather than being conducted through the European Union. That is something that we will look to continue to strengthen.

As we look forward to the NATO summit, we need to accept first and foremost that we have to invest more in defence. We need our allies to step up and spend a minimum of 2% of GDP. This is something that the United Kingdom has led on ever since the Wales NATO summit in 2014, and our efforts have encouraged all allies to increase their spending. More are meeting that target, and most have plans to reach it. As the NATO Secretary General said earlier this month, non-US spending has increased by $87 billion between 2014 and 2018, but the US still accounts for more than 70% of the allies’ combined defence expenditure. When Britain leaves the European Union, 82% of NATO’s contribution will come from non-EU countries. We have to be honest with ourselves, however. We cannot expect US taxpayers to keep picking up the tab for European defence indefinitely; nor can we expect US patience to last for ever. We as a continent have to step up to the responsibility of playing a pivotal role in defending ourselves and not to expect others to do it for us.

Today presents us with an opportunity to play a bigger role in defence. Our next priority will be about ensuring that the alliance is ready to act rapidly. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) touched on at the start of the debate, we need to be able to act within weeks, days or hours, not months.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman will remember the discussions we had about NATO and defence spending when he was wearing a different hat about a year ago. Will he go into more detail about the other countries that are not contributing 2% of GDP? When does he estimate that some of our major European partners will reach the 2% threshold? They are spending more, but when are they likely to reach the threshold?

Gavin Williamson: I remember those discussions well, and I kind of wish that the right hon. Gentleman had demanded that a few more ships be built at Harland.
and Wolff—perhaps a third aircraft carrier. We expect eight nations to be meeting the 2% target by the end of this year and 14 nations by 2024, but that is still not enough. Some of the largest economies in Europe continue to lag behind considerably. Estonia is meeting the 2% target, but we must encourage other nations, such as Germany, to take the opportunity to spend 2% on defence. My open offer to them is that if they do not know how to spend it, I am sure that we could do that for them.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about readiness and our ability to respond. I will touch on that later in my speech, so the hon. Gentleman should feel free to intervene then if I need to make something clear.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Going back to the naval issue and equipping NATO, does my right hon. Friend agree that that is about not just increasing the level of spending to 2%, but where it is invested? The Royal Navy is going through a period of complete renewal and will have some of the most advanced ships and capabilities in the world. Will he be making representations, especially at the NATO summit, about the need to review matters and have leading technologies, particularly against the threat of Russian naval technology? After the failure of the Zumwalt-class destroyers and its return to the Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, the United States is going backwards with some of its technology.

Gavin Williamson: We can be proud of our investments in new technology, such as the new Poseidon aircraft that will operate over the north Atlantic or the Type 26 frigates that are currently being constructed in Glasgow. We are leading the world in the development of and investment in technology. Nations such as the United States actually look to us to take that leadership, to point the way forward and to take responsibility for ensuring that the north Atlantic routes remain safe.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On the readiness of our armed forces, will the Secretary of State tell us about the Government’s record on Army recruitment? We are worried that they are making insufficient progress on this important matter.

Gavin Williamson: We are doing everything that we can, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces is leading on that, ensuring that meet all our operational requirements and, most importantly, changing how we recruit so that we are able to fill the Army to our desired target of 82,000.

Nick Smith: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Williamson: I have been very generous in taking interventions. Will the hon. Gentleman let me make some progress?

We need to look at how we ensure NATO is able to respond swiftly to changing threats not in months, not just in weeks but in days and hours, and not simply on land, sea and air but in the new grey danger zones of cyber-space and space itself. For that to happen, our alliance must keep changing and adapting to deal with new threats. NATO must reform itself structurally so there are far fewer barriers to action, and it must reform itself politically so nations can swiftly agree on measures to take and on how to use the power at their disposal decisively, particularly when it comes to cyber and hybrid attacks, which often occur beneath the normal threshold for a collective response.

Lastly, NATO must maintain the mass needed to assemble, reinforce and win a conflict in Europe at short notice. We need to look at how we can forward base more of our equipment, and possibly personnel. That is why today we are looking hard at our infrastructure in Germany, particularly our vehicle storage, heavy transport and training facilities. Along with our NATO allies, we are continually testing our agility and responsiveness through exercises in Europe.

We need to do more, and we need to look more closely at how we can have the forces we need to deal with the threats we face today. The threats today are so different from the threats in 2010, but we should not underestimate our adversaries’ intent and willingness to use military force.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I see that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is no longer with us, but it will not have escaped his notice that this is a very well attended debate.

When the Defence Secretary gave evidence to the Select Committee on Defence, he told us it would take 90 days to mobilise our war-fighting division and deploy it to the Baltic states in an emergency. Can he give the House any reassurance that we are looking at that again in the Modernising Defence programme to see whether we can come up with ways of responding more quickly if the situation requires?

Gavin Williamson: We must not look at this issue in isolation. We need to look at it as an issue that every NATO member has to face and deal with. We have to work incredibly closely with our allies, whether it is Germany, Poland or Estonia, on how we can be more responsive and how we can ensure that we have the capability to react to those changing threats.

NATO is only as strong as its weakest link, so every NATO member must do what it needs to do to give its people the modern equipment, the skills and the support to cope with the challenges that lie ahead. We need a future force that is able to respond rapidly and globally, a force that can operate in the full range of combat environments and across all domains, and a force to provide leadership in NATO, European formations and coalitions.

We must never hesitate: sometimes we will have to lead others, and sometimes we will have to act alone. We have to have the capability and the armed forces to be able to do that. NATO must do more to up its spending to speed up its response and to reinforce its capabilities, but to succeed in this darker and more dangerous age, it must show one quality above all—resolve.
As in the old days of the cold war, adversaries new and old are seeking to divide us, to undermine our values and to spread lies and misinformation. Our response must be unity. We must stand firm and we must stand together, speaking with one voice and holding fast to the vision that united us in the days of old against aggression, against totalitarianism and against those who wish to do us harm. And we must be ready to stand in defence of our security and our prosperity.

The UK should be immensely proud of the role it has played in the alliance since its inception and of the way it has helped lead the organisation during the most challenging period in its modern history, but, as I told our allies the other day, we are not looking backwards. Our eyes are firmly fixed on the future and on how we can make sure NATO remains the world’s greatest defensive alliance, the guardian of free people everywhere and the guarantor of the security of future generations.

In its great charter, NATO commits “to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” Those are British values. They are at the heart of our nation. For the past 70 years, brave British men and women have given their all to defend our nation. We are determined to do everything in our power to ensure the alliance continues to guard our great liberties for another 70 years and beyond.

4.41 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to debate the role of NATO. The timing is particularly appropriate, with the debate coming ahead of the NATO summit next month. The alliance is the cornerstone of our defence and our collective security, and Labour Members are proud of the role our party played in its founding. The leadership of Clement Attlee and his Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was so instrumental in setting up the alliance in 1949. Bevin moved the motion “That this House approves the North Atlantic Treaty”.

That established NATO. He spoke in that debate of the backdrop of growing global instability and the shared determination of the 12 founding members to avoid any return to conflict. The increasingly aggressive actions of the Soviet Union drove the Government to consider, as he put it, “how like-minded, neighbourly peoples, whose institutions had been marked down for destruction, could get together, not for the purpose of attack, but in sheer self-defence.”—[Official Report, 12 May 1949; Vol. 464, c. 2011-2013.]

Bevin was clear that the creation of the alliance was not an aggressive act but was instead about deterrence, a fundamental principle of NATO to this day. The Atlantic treaty was to send a message to potential adversaries that NATO’s members were not a number of weak, divided nations, but rather a united front bound together in the common cause of collective self-defence.

James Heappey: Last year, the Labour party leader was asked about article 5 of the NATO treaty and he responded: “That doesn’t necessarily mean sending troops. It means diplomatic, it means economic, it means sanctions, it means a whole range of things.”

Will the hon. Lady clarify from the Dispatch Box now that, if one of our NATO allies were attacked militarily and he were Prime Minister, he would respond with military action?

Nia Griffith: I will confirm that Labour 100% supports NATO and, as the Leader of the Opposition has made absolutely clear, we want to work within it to promote democracy and to project stability. That is exactly what we would do if we were in government.

Dr Mrurison: Nobody doubts the hon. Lady’s commitment to our armed forces and to NATO, but her leader has one signal virtue, consistency—it is a virtue in a politician. He has not changed his mind on anything since the 1970s. What then are we to make of an individual who only six years ago said that NATO was a “danger to world peace” and that it was “a major problem”?

Nia Griffith: As I have just explained, our leader has been very clear about the position we hold, and he does see that working within NATO is very important for projecting stability and promoting democracy. Let me make some progress now, if I may.

NATO’s founding was not meant in any way to undermine or detract from the primacy of the United Nations; rather, it was to work alongside the UN, in full conformity with the principles of the UN charter. The generation that established NATO, the one that endured the horror and destruction of two world wars, were keenly aware of the overriding need to achieve peace and stability wherever possible. When he outlined article 5’s implications and its guarantee of collective security, Bevin told the House: “This does not mean that every time we consult there will be military action. We hope to forestall attack...We have to seek to promote a peaceful settlement.”—[Official Report, 12 May 1949; Vol. 464, c. 2020-2021.]

Indeed, the principle of settling disputes by peaceful means is articulated clearly in article 1 of the NATO treaty.

Today, the alliance has grown to 29 members and, as well as its central role of ensuring the security of the north Atlantic area, NATO supports global security by working with partners around the world. NATO supported the African Union’s peacekeeping mission in Sudan and has worked alongside the European Union’s Operation Atalanta to combat piracy in the gulf of Aden off the horn of Africa. NATO offers training, advice and assistance to the Afghan national security forces through the Resolute Support mission. In addition, the NATO training mission in Iraq provides support and mentoring to Iraq’s armed forces personnel. The alliance has also assisted with humanitarian relief efforts, including those in Pakistan after the devastating 2005 earthquake and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Russia’s recent actions, including its disgraceful and illegal annexation of Crimea and the Donbass in 2014, have led to renewed focus on the immediate security of the alliance area and, indeed, the need to secure NATO’s eastern border. At the 2016 Warsaw summit, the allies resolved to establish an enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states and Poland as a means of providing reassurance to those NATO members and a credible deterrent to potential adversaries. The tailored forward presence in the Black sea region makes an important contribution to regional security there.
I have had the privilege of visiting Estonia twice, and I have met our personnel serving there as part of Operation Cabrit. It was clear from our conversations with the Estonians that they truly value our presence there, particularly as they have worked so closely with our personnel in Afghanistan. The Estonians themselves have offered to help another NATO ally, France, with its mission in west Africa. For them, that is about offering reciprocity for the security that NATO allies give them to maintain their freedom in Estonia. They know that the collective protection of NATO is what makes them different from Ukraine.

Although the provision of deterrence through conventional means in Estonia, Poland and Romania is of great importance, we must also be alive to the risk that adversaries, including non-state actors, will increasingly deploy hybrid and cyber-warfare and use destabilising tactics specifically designed not to trigger article 5. We have all heard the reports of how Russia has used cyber-warfare; indeed, when I visited the cyber centre in Estonia, I heard about how Estonia has had direct experience of a cyber-attack that affected major computer networks throughout the country, and about what the staff there did to combat it. That was a reminder that when we reflect on the state of our own defences—as the Government are currently doing with the modernising defence programme—we must bear in mind the need to invest in the whole range of conventional and cyber-capabilities, and not to view it as an either/or situation.

The Warsaw summit communiqué, which set out plans for the enhanced forward presence, also stated that “deterrence has to be complemented by meaningful dialogue and engagement with Russia, to seek reciprocal transparency and risk reduction.”

Of course, Russia’s aggressive stance, and her repeated assaults on our rules-based international system, have made any productive engagement nigh on impossible. The response to the recent poisonings in Salisbury, for which we hold Russia responsible, demonstrated the strength of the alliance in the face of Russian aggression, with a great number of our allies, and NATO itself, joining us in the expulsion of diplomats. It is none the less positive that the NATO-Russia Council has met recently, because we need to use any and all opportunities for dialogue. What is perhaps most worrying about the current state of affairs is that even at the height of the cold war we maintained lines of communication, which are essential to avoid misunderstandings that can lead to very rapid escalations. There is currently far less engagement.

Our co-operation with allies in Estonia and Poland highlights the importance of the interoperability of our equipment in enabling us to work closely with other NATO members in a variety of settings. That is something that was raised with me when I visited NATO headquarters in Brussels shortly after I took up my post. It was clear that NATO wishes to see greater harmonisation in equipment. Although I recognise that decisions about defence procurement must be taken freely by sovereign states, it clearly does make sense to maximise the opportunities to work together and to avoid unnecessary duplication, wherever possible.
as the sole organisation for the collective defence of Europe, and defence has always been the sovereign responsibility of each EU member state, it is none the less the case that from March 2019 we will lose our voice and our vote in the EU Foreign Affairs Council and in many other important committees. We must therefore look at other ways of co-ordinating action with European partners where it is in our interests to do so—for example, in defending the Iran nuclear deal, which was so painstakingly negotiated and risks being completely trashed by President Trump.

It is also very important that we retain the position of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe once we have left the EU and that we resist any attempts to allocate that role to another European state. Ultimately, Labour believes very firmly that Brexit must not be an opportunity for the UK to turn inwards, or to shirk our international obligations.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Speaking personally as someone who has worked for the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and been chief of policy at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, I cannot see in any way how anyone could suggest that the Deputy SACEUR could be anything but British as things stands. It has absolutely nothing to do with the European Union.

Nia Griffith: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to let the hon. Gentleman intervene. We absolutely agree with what he says.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): May I pick up the hon. Lady on the point that she has just made? Like me, does she see the future of our role in Europe as being twofold: first, on defence, with NATO; and secondly, on civil affairs, with the Council of Europe? They were both formed at the same time. They both have similar membership and they both try to do the same thing.

Nia Griffith: The Labour party wants absolute, full co-operation with European partners. We recognise that we are leaving the EU, but in every other respect we want to be fully European. We want to have full co-operation within NATO and the Council of Europe.

We are living in an increasingly unpredictable world, with a very unpredictable—and, at times, isolationist—United States Administration, so it is all the more important that the UK uses its voice.

Mr Francois: I do not know whether the House is aware, but I was born in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), so I ask the hon. Lady: if the right hon. Gentleman were to become Prime Minister, would it be his intention to declare our nuclear deterrent to NATO as it is currently declared?

Nia Griffith: We have made our position on the nuclear deterrent absolutely clear. We support the nuclear deterrent and we support NATO. That is our party policy.

I think that I had just mentioned the isolationist US Administration.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On that point, there is a huge danger that we spend our time focusing on the President’s tweets and not looking at what America is actually doing. Certainly at the moment, its financial contributions, its people contributions and its commitment to NATO are higher than they have ever been. The support that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly receives from members of Congress such as Mike Turner, Joe Wilson and Jennifer González-Colón is absolutely 100% towards the NATO alliance. It is dangerous to see the US totally through the prism of the President.

Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend not only for the work that she does on behalf of this Parliament in respect of NATO, but for making a very valid point and clarifying exactly the position that we do seem to have at the moment with the United States.

It is all the more important for the UK to use our voice, through organisations such as NATO, to be a force for good in this world. It was the same internationalist outlook that inspired Ernest Bevin when he said:

“In co-operation with like-minded peoples, we shall act as custodians of peace and as determined opponents of aggression, and shall combine our great resources and great scientific and organisational ability, and use them to raise the standard of life for the masses of the people all over the world.”


I sincerely believe that NATO can still be that stabilising influence in an ever-changing world, and a strong and resolute force for the values of democracy and freedom that we cherish.

4.57 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I believe that I am right in saying that this is the third defence debate this year to be held in the main Chamber and if the opening speeches—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman just as he is starting. I had omitted to tell him and the House that there has to be an initial time limit of seven minutes, which will begin not from when the right hon. Gentleman started, but from now.

Dr Lewis: That is very generous of you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

If the opening speeches in this debate are anything to go by, I think that the temperature will be very similar to that of the first two debates and show a welcome unanimity on both sides of the House about the importance of defence investment in peacetime to ensure that we minimise the chances of conflict breaking out.

The shadow Secretary of State referred to the importance of investing in the whole range of conventional capabilities. As far as I can see, that is common ground among all the main parties in this House, even though there are differences of opinion about the nuclear dimension. The difficulty that we face is that defence investment costs a lot of money, and defence inflation has been running ahead of defence investment. As a result, we repeatedly hear phrases such as “hollowing out” and “black holes in the budget”. It was useful that she said that she felt that defence investment, in real terms, had fallen by about £10 billion.

I do not think I am giving away anything more than I should by saying that in a few days’ time the Defence Committee will publish a new report entitled, “Indispensable Allies?”, referring to the defence relationship between the United States, the United Kingdom and NATO. In
that report, we do some calculations and projections about defence investment. We can see that at every level at which we estimate gross domestic product to grow over the next few years, an extra 0.5% of GDP equates, roughly speaking, to £10 billion. That is why when my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) referred to the need to move towards 2.5% or 3% of GDP, we understood the sorts of figures that we are aiming to achieve.

It was slightly unfortunate that when we published our most recent report, “Beyond 2 per cent”, a few days ago, it coincided with the welcome announcement that £20 billion will be found for investment in the national health service. As I said in an intervention, while we obviously welcome the investment that is made in other high-spending Departments, it is important to remember how defence used to compare with those other calls on our Exchequer. At the time of the cold war in the 1980s, which is in the memory of most of us sitting in this House today, we spent roughly the same on health, on education and on defence. Now we spend multiples more on activities other than defence. Indeed, welfare—on which we used to spend 6% in the 1960s, just as we spent 6% on defence at that time—now takes up six times as much of our national wealth as defence. So it is fairly easy to see that, by any standard of comparison, defence has fallen down the scale of our national priorities.

We have been very focused on Europe today because of the debate that took place immediately prior to this debate. It is worth reminding ourselves of the steps that led to the foundation of NATO. This may come as a slight surprise to some Members, but it actually goes back to the end of 1941, when three small European countries, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands—who had all been overrun by Nazi Germany and whose Foreign Ministers were taking shelter in London—made an approach to the British Foreign Office. They said, “We’ve tried being neutral. We’ve tried keeping out of power politics. It has failed. Our countries have been occupied by brutal aggressors. When this terrible war is over, we want Britain to have permanent military bases on our territory so that we can never be caught out like this again.” It was from that invitation given to the United Kingdom to base military forces in countries that had put their trust in pacifism and neutralism, and had that trust betrayed, that NATO ultimately came into existence.

The Secretary of State began by paying tribute to the people who made the ultimate sacrifice in a time of war. It is certainly the case that when a war breaks out, there is no shortage of people willing to make that sacrifice, and what is more, there is no shortage of money to be invested in fighting and winning that conflict. The question that always faces us is what to do in peacetime. There is a paradox of peacetime preparedness, if Members will excuse the alliteration, which is that we prepare by investing in armed forces that we hope will never be used. That is what we have to do, and it is a difficult battle to fight to persuade people in peacetime to invest money in things that we hope we will not have to send into action.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In terms of future investment in something that we do not want to have to use, does the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that some of that future investment could be lost through dollar dependency in the equipment plan, meaning that any additional moneys coming from the Government would be lost and have no long-term benefit?

Dr Lewis: Yes. The hon. Gentleman, who is a valued member of the Defence Committee, has argued that point consistently on the Committee. The Government certainly need to bear that in mind when placing orders for expensive new equipment, at least during a period of uncertainty when there is doubt that the pound will hold its value against another currency.

In conclusion, we have an opportunity in this NATO summit to show that we are leading by example. It was never the case that we were anywhere near the NATO minimum of defence expenditure. It was always the case that we were second only to the Americans. We must try to restore that situation, and that means raising more money for defence and spending more money on defence. Spending 2.5% of GDP will restore us to where we were a few years ago; 3% of GDP should be our target, because only that way can we be ready for the threats that sadly face us today and show no sign whatever of diminishing.

5.6 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a great shame that the Chancellor, who was lingering by the Speaker’s Chair earlier, did not take the time to join us. As those who normally attend these defence debates will know, we have been desperate to get a Treasury Minister to join us at some point, and we have still not used our collective imagination to deliver that outcome. I am sure he will read Hansard as soon as it is off the printers later this evening.

I begin by sincerely commending the Government for bringing this debate forward. Many of us have hoped that the Government would bring a defence debate forward in Government time at some point. We debated a defence-related Bill that was in the Queen’s Speech on the Floor of the House, and there was a broader debate on national security following the Salisbury incident, but it would be useful to have more of these defence debates in Government time where possible. I am sure that those on the Government and shadow French Benches will join me in congratulating NATO on its move to new headquarters and wish it well in its new home.

The upcoming summit carries with it much anticipation. A changing threat landscape could take the alliance, which is so crucial for security, into an uncertain future. Much has been said about an increasingly defiant Russia, and I am sure much will be said about the intemperate words of the United States President. Both those things should motivate member states to unite in solidarity for the sake of the future of the alliance, which does so much to underpin international order and security.

Arguably NATO has not faced a crisis such as this since the end of the cold war. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO was a changing body that had to adapt to a new purpose; it required a new vision to continue being the most successful defence and security alliance in the history of the world. Questions were raised as to whether solidarity could be upheld sans the threat of the Soviet Union; whether new forms of threat
could be met by the north Atlantic alliance; and whether a security and defence alliance of this nature was ever really required at all. Some of those questions still echo in the discourse today, which is why it is important that those of us who believe in institutions such as NATO—and the United Nations Security Council, which is a failing instrument at the moment—continue to make the case for them.

In its longevity, NATO has kept land, sea and airspace safe, but new forms of attack, such as rising cyber-warfare and the horrifying poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in March, demonstrate that our security is being threatened by means not explicitly covered by the traditional article 5 definition of attack. Let us take the example of the Skripal attack. The Russian use of a nerve agent on UK soil was a violation of the chemical weapons convention and, of course, of international law. It was a premeditated attack that attempted to kill two people within UK borders. The choice of weapon in itself demonstrates the particular venom of the actor involved. The nerve agent Novichok blocks a crucial enzyme in the nervous system, causing nerves to become over-excited and sending muscles—both internal and external—into spasm. The whole House will rightly have been horrified by what happened in Salisbury in March. That is one example of how the changing threat picture affects us, but of course it is not new to our Baltic allies.

There are also the more traditional threats, some of which were outlined by the Defence Secretary himself. Let us, for example, take the threat of Russian submarine activity, which is now at the highest levels since the days of the cold war. The Secretary of State knows the concerns of SNP Members about the high north and Icelandic gap, but I implore Members not just to think of this as the Scottish bit of the NATO debate, because it would be ill-advised to look at it in that way.

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman knows of my passionate interest in the Arctic. Does he agree with me in very much looking forward to the forthcoming report from the Defence Committee, which I think is nearing completion? It will come out just in time to match the Norwegian report, which I think will come out in September. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will come along to the all-party group for the polar regions, where we will be discussing it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I pay a genuine and generous tribute to him, as I am sure my SNP colleagues do, for the work he has done in his party and as a member of the Defence Committee to bring attention to that part of the world. It is a seriously testing issue that, to be fair, is understood by the Defence Secretary, and is certainly understood by Sir Stuart Peach and General Sir Nick Carter. I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for taking the time to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) to discuss these issues. We now live in hope that the high north and Icelandic gap will be a prominent feature of the upcoming modernising defence programme.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is heartening to hear the Secretary of State for Defence recognise, in the modernising defence programme, unlike in previous SDSRs, that this is actually an island and that we are moving forward in the high north and the north Atlantic?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes, indeed. In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State mentioned that previous SDSRs made no mention of Russia and, indeed, that the most recent one made no mention of the fact that Britain is an island, and these things really matter.

As I have mentioned, NATO now faces external and internal threats—the latter is wholly unprecedented—but it faces them against the backdrop of an entirely broken United Nations Security Council. It is regrettable that, despite repeated calls from the Opposition Benches urging the Government to knock heads together and return some order to the Security Council, they still do not appear to have done so. What of the internal threat? The US President has long criticised the alliance for the amount that the United States contributes. That has been adumbrated by the Secretary of State, and I take on board the points made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). She made a valuable point, but at the same time, we cannot ignore the White House, although I appreciate her expertise as a Member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

It is not a new occurrence that the United States provides almost three quarters of direct contributions to NATO, and a substantial amount of indirect contributions on top of that. This has been a source of ire for the Trump Administration, who have openly accused other member states of not pulling their weight. So all eyes will indeed be on Brussels this month. Will the President come in like a wrecking ball, or will he come in as an opportunist, seeking to improve relations after an incredibly testing G7 summit?

Last week at Defence questions, the Secretary of State emphasised Secretary Mattis’s explicit and unwavering commitment to NATO and to European defence. That would be somewhat encouraging if only it were reflected in the discourse of President Trump, who continues to lambast the alliance through the lens of his “America First” politics.

Mrs Moon: There are other dialogues taking place that are equally important. In the last week alone, we have had General Ben Hodges here for the land warfare conference. Lieutenant General Joe Anderson was here, and Admiral Fogg was here as well. So there are other dialogues happening that are equally important. Again, I would caution about the President’s tweets, as opposed to what others are actually doing.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady is of course right to put these things on the record, and I recognise exactly what she is saying, but this is not just about Twitter and, as I say, we cannot ignore the White House. These are speeches that the US President has made on the campaign trail and since he assumed office. Given the way in which the President operates, I am sorry to say that everything could change any day. However, I do take the hon. Lady’s point—she is absolutely correct.

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We are incredibly blessed to have such a resolute ally as the United States, and it has been a privilege to work with Defence Secretary Jim Mattis—you
could not find an individual who is more committed to the transatlantic alliance. However, it is not just about words; it is about deeds and about investment of over literally, billions of dollars, which the United States has invested in the defence of Europe. It is important to recognise that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I take the Secretary of State’s point entirely. I had not intended to get so caught up in the Trump issue, but I am grateful for what the Secretary of State says. It would be good to see him forcefully remind the entirety of the Trump Administration—of course there are people in there who are agreeable and who get this sort of stuff—of the importance of the alliance to them and the European continent.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I want to make a bit of progress.

I want to address one other issue that I am sure will be on the lips of many at the upcoming summit, and that is Nord Stream 2. I had the pleasure recently of visiting Ukraine, and I had a series of meetings with politicians, senior civil servants, journalists, and civil society and anti-corruption activists. I would like to pay a generous tribute to the UK personnel working from the embassy out there, led by the ambassador, Judith Gough, who is doing an outstanding job.

Ukraine is, of course, not a NATO state. It is on the frontline of a military and an ideological war—and we should understand that, for Ukraine, it is indeed a war. In just about every one of those meetings, the issue of Nord Stream 2 came up. People want to know why Ukraine’s allies are allowing such a project—which would deliver enormous financial and political capital and leverage right into the hands of the Kremlin—to go ahead without much protest.

This is where the Americans have got it right. In so far as I can understand it—I am willing and hoping to be proven wrong by the Government—the UK Government position appears to be that this is a matter entirely for the Germans, the Danes and the Russians. Why are the Germans, the Danes and the Russians? Why are the UK Government feigning such impotence? Do they really believe that the establishment of Nord Stream 2 has no repercussions beyond those three states? Can they really not see the potential security threat that it so obviously represents to the United Kingdom and the alliance? I implore the Secretary of State, with the support of those on these Benches, to start some robust and frank dialogue with our allies and not to allow this white elephant to turn into a potentially dangerous snake.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I passionately agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Ukrainian Prime Minister has described Nord Stream 2 as a new form of hybrid warfare, and he has said that Nord Stream 1 allowed Russia to renew its military and to finance the invasion of Ukraine. The UK Government cannot remain neutral on this issue.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee is absolutely correct. Do we really believe that the cash from Nord Stream 2 will not go into the financing of far-right political parties all across Europe, even here in the UK? Do we really believe it will not be funding lies and propaganda—we call it fake news—across the EU? Of course it will be.

I want to mention the Chair of the Defence Committee’s “Beyond 2 per cent” report, which is a most welcome document. It is clear from that document that the Ministry of Defence is struggling to create a long-term defence plan, partly due to the black hole of up to £20 billion in its equipment plan resulting from a culture of chaos and clumsy procurement decisions that have not been properly funded: a Royal Navy at historically low numbers and recruitment for the Army that is missing targets every single year. It is of paramount importance that that clumsiness does not impact on sufficient burden-sharing for the alliance. Direct contributions should be upheld in the UK, just as they are in any other member state, but indirect contributions should also be provided as a symbol of this country’s commitment to a safer and more secure world.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the MOD is trying to meet the NATO target, it should not be trying to make it up by double counting money that is also being counted towards international development aid? The Government should be making every effort to meet the 0.7% target and the 2% target separately, with separate funds.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. No one does accounting like the Ministry of Defence. It gets past the 2% line because of pensions and efficiency savings, but the National Audit Office cannot find any evidence that those efficiency savings exist. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

In conclusion, the reason NATO did not collapse along with the Soviet Union in the 1990s is that it adapted to emerging threat landscapes to maintain international security. NATO has demonstrated success in its missions, such as in Kosovo where it saved lives and helped to underpin international order. However, just as after the second world war and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO is now on the brink of a new adaption to secure all of us in the modern age. I have every faith in the alliance to continue operating as the strongest multinational defence institution in history, and I have every hope that the summit next month will begin to tackle threats in a proper and peaceful way. I can only hope that the UK Government will play their proper part.

5.22 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), I am delighted we are having this debate and that it has attracted such strong attendance. NATO summits, unless we host them ourselves, do not always get the attention they should. I have attended three of them. They are always important, but they are each in their own way. Rather than reminisce, however, I would like to focus on what I think will be important next month.

First, this will be the first opportunity for Britain to set out its view of our security post Brexit. We are leaving our partnership with the European Union, which involves far closer military co-operation inside the European
Union than many people realise. For example, the European Union headquarters at Northwood has been mentioned. We need to be clearer about our ambition and the continuing role we want to play, both on the European continent and beyond. The security partnership document recently published by my right hon. Friends is a very good start, but I hope the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary will use the summit as an opportunity to set out their view of our security after we leave the European Union. I hope they might be able to find a way of doing that in harmony.

Secondly, it is worth reminding ourselves that although the Russian threat is very real and has grown, certainly since the 2010 review and even since the 2015 review, we need to continue to take a 360 degree view of NATO. It is worth reminding ourselves that the only time article 5 has been invoked was to help the United States after 9/11. The last time that NATO troops were sent into live military operations in Europe was to help save Muslims in Bosnia. So it is not just the pressure on the eastern frontier. We need to keep looking at NATO security in the round: pressures on the Black sea, on the eastern Mediterranean and from the south. We need to understand that the survival of those very fragile democracies in the western Balkans and in the middle east—even in Afghanistan—is just as important for our security here in the west, because if, in the end, they do collapse, we are vulnerable to the spread of transnational terror groups and the threat of mass migration on a scale that we have not yet seen.

Thirdly, on NATO membership, of course we welcomed the accession of Montenegro last year. It is very important that NATO continues to demonstrate that it is open and that there can be no veto on future applications. It is particularly important to the continuing stability of the western Balkans that we show that, provided they meet the proper criteria, there is a route through for those war-torn countries into the alliance.

Fourthly, on resources, there is nothing new about the American President’s insistence that European countries pay more—that has been said by every American President throughout my political career, and we should, of course, listen. However, at the Wales summit, four years ago now, we did all commit to the 2%. It is bad enough that only four countries meet the 2%, but what I still find really shocking is that 16 countries—over half the alliance—do not even pay 1.5%, including three of the biggest countries in Europe: Germany, Spain and Italy.

Fifthly, I endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said about the need to continue to reform NATO—to drive forward the plans to modernise the decision-making structures, to enable the troops, planes and ships to be deployed faster across the continent of Europe, and to make sure that the political decision-making machinery is as equally adept and ready to be triggered.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman talks about readiness and the ability to respond. Does he think now that we ought to review the previous decision to re-base from Germany back into the UK, and that we should actually have a forward presence in Germany?

Sir Michael Fallon: We continued in my time to keep that particular decision under review. There was not a particular year when all the troops were due to come home, and it was something that we watched particularly carefully as the plans for an enhanced forward presence in Estonia and Poland were developed. It is important, therefore, to be sure about whether the equipment is pre-positioned in the right places and whether it is ready to reinforce in the way that the right hon. Gentleman and I would want.

Finally, I hope that we will find ways beyond this debate of explaining the importance of NATO here at home—of explaining its success since 1949, as well as its obligations—to a new generation who do not, in this country, face conscription, but who are protected day and night by fresh cohorts of marvellous young men and women who step forward to serve in our armed forces. There is a compact there that I believe needs to be better understood. I hope this never happens, but when we next have to send our young men and women into military action wearing the blue beret, I think that we will regret that we did not do more to educate our public about the importance of NATO and the obligations that come with it. That said, I wish my hon. Friends every success at next month’s summit.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting St Helen’s Church in Wakefield for the unveiling of Wakefield Civic Society’s plaque to the Grenadier Guards, who were evacuated from Dunkirk and then had the good fortune to be billeted up to Wakefield, where they were fed, watered and patched up, only to be sent back out to fight valiantly in north Africa and at Monte Cassino. It commemorated the moment when a young boy with his dad, walking his dog, listened to the roll call of the people who had been left behind—killed, injured or missing—in Dunkirk. It was a very powerful ceremony.

We also had the unveiling at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park last week of “The Coffin Jump”, a new sculptural work of art by Katrina Palmer, in which she celebrates the creation of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. These brave women went out on to the battlefields of world war one on horses to bring back the injured men and to offer them medical assistance. Inscribed on the sculpture is a line of heroic modesty: “nothing special happened”.

It is important in this centenary year to remember why NATO exists. It exists to meet new challenges. We know that the new wars will not look like the old wars. I have the pleasure of serving with many Members present in the Chamber on NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly, and I serve on the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security. Civilian protection is not a central task of NATO, but since the 1950s the Civil Emergency Planning Committee has existed, and that is what I want to talk about today.

The operations that NATO is engaged in are to meet the new challenges of mass migration, climate change in the high north and Arctic, cyber-security and cyber warfare, and resource stress, with the water, food and energy nexus becoming ever more acute. Tackling disasters, whether natural or human made—clearing up after the disaster of Hurricane Katrina or the earthquake in Kashmir in 2006, providing humanitarian assistance in Kosovo in the late 1990s—is an important part of NATO’s soft power that is not talked about or recognised and given the attention it deserves.
One new threat we face is the rise in populism, nationalism and anti-Semitism across Europe along with Russian interference in our democratic processes. Russia is active on the eastern flank, as right hon. and hon. Members have said, and through the annexation of Crimea; we have seen 9,000 deaths in a proxy war in the eastern Ukraine; the UK has had to send 700 troops to Estonia and Poland to protect Europe’s eastern flank from Russian aggression; and finally—after several years—we have had the joint investigation team’s report into the downing of Malaysian flight MH17 by a Russian anti-aircraft missile fired from the Russian Federation, in which 298 innocent people, 80 of them children, were murdered. Russia must play her part in ensuring that those responsible face justice.

On the eastern flank, we also have Russian aggression with the placing of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. We have an arc of threat, with Russia active in Syria, on our south-eastern border, supporting the indiscriminate bombardment of civilians and chemical weapons attacks in that country, and in the high north, where it is also active. After the cold war, Russia shut its 64 bases, but it is now reopening them, creating all-weather landing strips, and we know that 20% of Russia’s GDP depends on the Arctic, which I know is something the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) has done a great deal of work on. We in this country have seen this hybrid threat from Russia, in the poisoning of Litvinenko in 2006 and in the attack on the Skripals in Salisbury—more state-sponsored terrorism by Russia and the first use of chemical weapons in western Europe since the end of world war two.

We need to think long and hard about our civilian security in this country. The threat permeates our news channels as well. Disinformation campaigns, fake news, cyberbots on social media, even embassies and ambassadors, are being used to create confusion and alternative narratives to those in the mainstream media. In the new information war, tweets are cheaper than tanks. The cold war had rules, but the hybrid war has no rules, no norms, no regulations. It is a dangerous new era for NATO. Cyber-attacks are becoming more destructive and complex, and we know that President Putin wants to go back to the days of large nation states with spheres of influence deciding what smaller nations do. That is not NATO’s vision as set out in the partnership for peace announced by Bill Clinton back in the early ‘90s; its vision is of individual sovereign states making their own decisions.

I want to conclude with the heartbreaking pictures we have seen of little children in camps and the news today that three tender age camps for infants under five have been opened in Texas. At the moment, there is no system for family reunification in those camps. We are seeing a human tragedy of catastrophic proportions unfolding in the nation that is our closest ally, and we have a duty and a responsibility to speak out when we see traumatised children being scarred for life in such conditions.

Europe and our country will not take lessons on immigration from a man who separates children from their parents and by whom they are locked up, weeping; a man who dehumanises those children and their parents as “an infestation”, using language redolent of the Hutu génocidaires in Rwanda, and who treats their parents as criminals, as if they have broken the law, when they have committed, at most, a civil infraction. He is taking the United States out of the United Nations Human Rights Council, because he only wants human rights for some people some of the time, not for all the people all of the time.

The real danger, however, is that President Trump is a man who does not like multilateralism. We have seen that with the Paris accords, the Iran deal and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and we know that it is a risk for NATO. We must come through that, and the summit must send those messages to President Trump in a clear and unequivocal way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am reducing the speaking limit to five minutes, so that everyone will be treated equally and everyone will have a chance to speak.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who is a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and it is a great privilege to lead that delegation, whose membership includes former Cabinet Ministers. We have three former Defence Ministers, a former party leader, other former Ministers, and Members of Parliament with a real interest in—and knowledge and experience of—defence issues, including one holder of the Distinguished Service Order. My friend the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is the deputy leader.

The assembly currently has a key role. Many Members have spoken today of the need to connect people in this country with defence and help them to understand what our relationship with our allies is all about. We have the job of holding NATO to account, informing our fellow parliamentarians—with whom we can discuss many of the issues that we raise in the various committees on which we sit—and also enabling people in this country to understand this great alliance, its values, and its vision for our security. In 2019 we will welcome hundreds of NATO parliamentarians to London, and I look forward to that.

The Royal Air Force was created 100 years ago, as a result of a new technology which had created the first new battlefield for millennia. Today we face the same scenario with the cyber threat. At a recent meeting in this building, we heard from Mark Galeotti, a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations in Prague and a renowned Russia expert. He worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who produced a fascinating paper entitled “A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict: How Does the Kremlin Wage War?”

As others have pointed out and as we know ourselves, conventional wars are expensive in terms of both blood and treasure. We know that the cost of one missile that we fire at a building in Syria can run into seven figures, and we know that we are not alone: Russia, too, suffers from unrest as the collins come home. Cyber is a cheap war to wage, and an effective means of attack: we saw the impact of the NotPetya attack on Ukraine. It is important for us to look at our defence posture in this
day and age, and to consider how we respond to this
new battlefield. We have defined our defence in sea,
land and air, but we now need a very clear cyber posture
as well. We should also follow the advice of Lord
Hague, who, in a recent article, referred to a re-evaluation
of article 5 of the NATO treaty. That might be something
for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to take
to the Brussels summit.

We need to look carefully at infrastructure as well.
Those of us who were cold war warriors will remember
that the infrastructure in West Germany was constructed
around moving troops very fast, and we know how
difficult it has been to establish the Enhanced Forward
Presence because of simple factors such as bridges, road
widths and border controls.

In the few minutes that I have I want to touch on
burden sharing. My right hon. Friend the Member for
Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) made a very important
point. The United States is far and away the biggest
supporter of the alliance, and we must help NATO-friendly
members of Congress by saying precisely as the Secretary
of State said earlier: that we recognise that Europe has
to step up. We have the benefit of the commitment
made at the Wales summit and it is a disgrace, frankly,
that some countries are not stepping up to that. My
figures are that six countries now do spend over 2%, which
is good, and the virtue of that certainly lies with the
United States, Britain, Romania, Poland, Greece and
the Baltics, but there are laggards and I am going to
table them, particularly Belgium and Spain. Belgium
has cut its defence spending to below 1%, and I think
that is wrong.

Mr Francois: Does my right hon. Friend agree that,
given the circumstances that he has outlined so clearly,
there is an even greater responsibility on us in the
United Kingdom to try to up our spending to show
the Americans that some of the Europeans are playing
the game?

Richard Benyon: It is very useful that we have accepted
in this debate that the 2% is a floor—not a flaw, I add to
help my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset
(Richard Drax)—and that as the threats change we may
have to raise it.

We must be a critical friend of NATO. In terms of the
NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Sir Hugh Bayley’s voice
is in my head when we talk about trying to hold NATO
to account for its failure to produce decent, sensible
audited accounts. We have a strength in that regard
because we are a significant contributor to the alliance;
it enables us to do that.

May I finish by paying tribute to the shadow Secretary
of State and those Labour Members who are committed
to defence? We must work with them on a bipartisan
basis, because I do not want to go into an election in
which a party that could enter government does not
believe in the value of our alliance, does not believe we
should keep our nuclear deterrent, and does not believe
that article 5 means what it says. Article 5 is the greatest
security that has been delivered to our peoples rich
and poor, old and young, down the ages since the
horrendous carnage of the second world war. That
bipartisan nature of our defence debate is very important
now, and I hope we can continue to value NATO now
and in the future.

5.42 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe
(Mr Clarke) said earlier, this debate could have been
tabled at any time over the coming weeks, so I wonder
whether the Government have allowed this debate to go
ahead today in order to make Her Majesty’s Opposition
feel slightly uncomfortable and to draw the team of the
right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)
to the Dispatch Box to talk in glowing terms about an
organisation that he clearly does not feel particularly
warm towards.

It also obviously serves the Government’s agenda to
talk about how they do not intend to neglect European
security after Brexit, but I cannot but feel that, in this
week of all weeks, they may have inadvertently drawn
attention to the relationship with the United States.
Atlanticism is a noble virtue and no one on these
Benches would underestimate the importance of a strong
relationship with the United States, but any country’s
national interest must be dictated by carefully balancing
our own interest with those of our allies, which are not
always the same. Like the hon. Member for Llanelli
(Nia Griffith), I recognise that, while on Capitol Hill
there is much support for NATO, the emboldened
actions of the Trump Administration, not just last
week, have shown us that—just as with Suez, just as
with Vietnam, and just as with decolonisation—a UK
Government cannot solely rely on the unequivocal support
of the United States, no matter how much they may
wish it; that is a historical reality.

I have noted this at other times in this place but it
bears repeating: every presidential Administration since
that of Dwight D. Eisenhower have made European
security and integration a major priority. It is with no
great relish that I note that the current Administration
do not see it as a priority. I rather fear our own Government
are simply deciding to hold hands and walk off into an
unsure future.

In my party’s submission to the modernising defence
programme consultation, we made it clear that this
Government’s commitment to the north Atlantic must
be explicitly stated and, dare I say it, that it must be
about a lot more than just just NATO. I am sure we all agree
that, if NATO did not exist, we would have to invent it.
So a commitment to NATO must be a commitment to
work as closely as possible with those allies around us in
the north Atlantic—those countries such as the kingdom
of Norway and the kingdom of Denmark whose invasions
during the second world war made imperative the existence
of NATO, and whose continued existence as sovereign
countries has greatly enhanced the international rules-based
system that we must continue to protect.

NATO may be—to borrow every Brexiteer’s favourite
truism—the cornerstone of our security but, from my
perspective, the European Union has been the economic
and social cement that has held it in place. This of
course does not mean that all will fall around us, but it
will make for more instability than we require. A state’s
security is not simply measured by the number of people
it can deploy under arms, by how many jets it has or by
how many frigates protect its shores. It is also measured
through the strength of our economy, the stability of our
geographical neighbourhood and the ease with which
we can do business there. Let me finish with this appeal
to state interest. NATO has served European and Atlantic
security extremely well over the last 70 years, and I fear that we are going to need it even more in future. Let us also remember that simply to praise its name is no substitute for understanding why the north Atlantic treaty was signed all those years ago.

5.46 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate this afternoon. May I just clear up one point on my use of the word “flaw” at the start of the debate, which my great friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), picked me up on a moment ago? When I used the word in response to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Defence, I meant that the 2% that we pay was, in my view, flawed and that I think that we should put more into defence—perhaps 3% or more. In my day—I served between 1978 and 1987—it was about 5% or 5.5%. The kit that we have now is more expensive to maintain, as are our soldiers, sailors and airmen, so, logically, we need more money to put into the defence of our country.

I have only a few minutes, but I would like to start by mentioning a wonderful film, “Darkest Hour”, which I am sure most people in this House have seen. There were two moments in the film that brought a lump to my throat. The first was when Kenneth Branagh, acting as the commander at the end of the pontoon, was waiting for deliverance from the beaches when he thought the German tanks were going to storm through and slaughter our men. He and a senior British Army officer were standing together, desolate and alone, surrounded by the enemy and with the end perhaps only minutes away. Then, out of the mist came the little boats. If I recall correctly, as the boats broke through the mist, the Army colonel turned to Kenneth Branagh and said, “What’s that?” Kenneth Branagh turned to him and said, “That’s home.” My God, that hit me! The point I am making is that we were absolutely alone, facing invasion by the Germans, followed by possible submission, and that 2% that we pay was, in my view, flawed and that I think that we should put more into defence—perhaps 3% or more. In my day—it was about 5% or 5.5%. The kit that we have now is more expensive to maintain, as are our soldiers, sailors and airmen, so, logically, we need more money to put into the defence of our country.

I would also like to talk about our relationship with the EU. A point that is often made by those who are opposed to our leaving, or who object to it for one reason or another, is that we are somehow going to desert Europe. I want to touch on something that happened when I was campaigning before the last election. A Frenchman about my age came charging out of his house in a village in my constituency, and he was extremely aggrieved. As I am sure most people know, I am a Brexiteer and campaigned to leave the EU during the referendum. The man came up to me and verbally assaulted me in a particularly unpleasant way, so I let him have his say. He then calmed down, so I stood back and said, “Have you now finished, sir?” He was breathless and said, “Yes. I’ve had my say.” I said to him, “What is the definition of a good friend? A really good friend.” He said, “I’m not sure that I understand what you are getting at.” I said, “For example, if something goes wrong—a divorce or whatever it may be—a true friend stands by the man or woman, or if something else goes wrong in your life, your friends stand by you. Is that the definition of a good friend?” He said, “Yes.” So, I said, “Who was with you on those beaches? Who was on the beaches four years later, along with our American, Canadian and other allies? Who gave you your freedom back?” At that point, he completely collapsed, and we left as good friends.

That is how I see our future relationship with our European friends and allies. There will be no difference between us. We will stand with them and fight evil and fight for freedom, as this country always has. We do not need to be in a super-state to do that. We need to be in charge of our own destiny and in control of our own armed forces. We need to have MPs elected to make difficult choices about whether to send our troops into battle if needs be. Whenever France, Germany or any other member of the European Union is in trouble—there have been many recent occurrences when they have been—where will Great Britain be? Right by their side. I hope that I have made my point.

5.51 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is wonderful to see how many right hon. and hon. Members have turned up for this debate, and I want to use the brief time available to me to consider the political threats. We have talked a lot about the military threats to the alliance, but we need to address a particular political threat, and I am not just talking about the rise of populist politicians and political parties that is straining the trust between NATO members and the accepted common values and aspirations across the alliance, which is a real threat. We must remember that we live in democracies, and democracies sometimes throw up leaders with whom we perhaps do not agree and whom we sometimes strongly oppose, but the point of a democracy is that, within the establishment of a Parliament, there is an opportunity for likeminded people to come together to discuss, debate and demonstrate a different way forward. That is what the NATO Parliamentary Assembly gives to us all.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) talked about the European Union. In this place, we often mistakenly say that the European Union and NATO are separate entities, but they are becoming increasingly close. That closer alignment is being complicated by political decisions within the individual members of the alliance, by Brexit, by the refugee and migrant crisis and by different domestic political priorities and coalition tensions. We must not forget that.

More importantly, however, we must address the disaffection of our own population. Canada did a poll recently with Ipsos MORI and found that only 40% of the population understood what NATO was, that 71% of women had no understanding of the NATO mission and that 71% of millennials were unaware of what NATO is. I am a member of a NATO working group that wrote to member states to ask how, and in what subjects, the role of NATO in the defence and security of the Atlantic alliance is taught in schools. Only 18 countries replied, and the UK was not one of them. The UK is not spending the 2% that we need to spend. We are writing again, and I hope the Minister will join me in making sure that the Department for Education responds and looks at the issue.
We found that there is definitely an east-west divide. In the western part of the alliance, there is a lower understanding of NATO, which is taught as if it is a history lesson only about the cold war. Estonia, in contrast, teaches global security and NATO in an elective course on national defence and has a new course on cyber-defence in its schools. Latvia includes security matters in social sciences, and it distributes information packages to schools and libraries explaining the myths about NATO. The Lithuanian Ministry of Defence has an education programme on national security and defence devoted to NATO. And in Poland, core curricula at primary and secondary schools teach issues related to security and defence.

Mary Creagh: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s brilliant leadership in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and to the work she does there. Does she agree that a brief history of NATO would be a more useful addition to the GCSE history curriculum than the current subjects: crime and punishment and the history of Britain’s great houses?

Mrs Moon: I hope that people in the Department for Education are listening to my hon. Friend, because it is essential that we reawaken the British public’s understanding of the nature of the threats we face. We have taken our security for granted, and too many of our citizens no longer see the risks and, indeed, no longer trust their Government to accurately portray the risks to them. That has been fertile ground for Russian disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks. In fact, in some respects, the most horrific thing about the attack in Salisbury is how many people have said to me, “Oh, it was M16.” They actually believe we carried out an attack on our own soil, on ourselves. We have to wake up to that and we have to deal with it.

The alliance is very good at addressing military weaknesses, but we are not very good at looking at how we ensure we take our populations with us. The disaffection of our public, their lack of recognition of the infiltration of our social media and cyber, and the attacks on our values, our politics and our alliance must be dealt with. We cannot carry on like this. We are like the frog in the water, and there is a risk we are not noticing that the heat is rising.

In relation to Brexit, our priority must be for the UK to reassure our allies not only of our total commitment but of our enhanced commitment to the NATO alliance, and that we will remain a strong, effective and committed partner. Finally—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Richard Drax: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Forgive me, but I have misled the House. In my speech I referred to the scene of a movie and I said it was “Darkest Hour.” That is not true; I was actually referring to “Dunkirk.”

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his clarification and for his characteristic courtesy in setting the record straight through the device of a point of order, and it has been noted by the House.

5.58 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): For the record, they are both great movies.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). She always speaks on these matters with great common sense, and her speech this afternoon is no exception.

In March 2018, the Defence Committee paid a visit to the United States of America, as part of which we held meetings in the Pentagon and the State Department, with some of our opposite numbers on the House Armed Services Committee and with the staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee, too. During our visit we experienced a great deal of American interest in what one might call the “Baltic states scenario.” Many of our interlocutors placed a strong emphasis on the readiness of US, European and NATO forces to respond to potential aggression against the Baltic states from a resurgent Russia. That raises the question: what might an assault on the Baltics look like? The Russian annexation of Crimea and de facto invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine provide at least some pointers towards what we might expect to see in the event of Russian adventurism and an attempt to intervene in the Baltics. If that were to come to pass, we could expect to see multiple elements of so-called “hybrid warfare” employed by Russia.

To begin with, any such assault might contain an element of maskirovka—strategic deception—perhaps by seeking to draw NATO’s attention away from the area prior to intervention, for instance, by creating a crisis in the Balkans. That might well be accompanied by the agitation of Russian minorities in the three Baltic states, where they represent approximately a quarter of the Latvian population, a quarter of the Estonian population and an eighth of the Lithuanian population respectively.

Richard Benyon: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this has already been trained for? There have already been cyber-attacks on countries such as Estonia, which have locked down many of their public services. So this is happening.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend is right about that, and it is no mistake that NATO’s centre of excellence on cyber-warfare is now located in Estonia.

As I was saying, such an attack would no doubt be accompanied by a considerable disinformation campaign, the widespread employment of deception and fake news, and quite possibly the appearance of large numbers of “little green men”, as we saw in both Crimea and Ukraine, perhaps under the guise of so-called “local defence units”. That would very likely be accompanied by Spetsnaz and other special forces activity, potentially backed up by airborne or air assault forces. It is worth noting that the Russian 76th guards air assault division, based at Pskov, is located only 100 km from the Estonian border.

Any such intervention would probably be covered by a wide-reaching air defence umbrella, including highly capable air defence systems, such as the S300 and S400, to help establish an anti-access area denial—or A2/AD—shield, designed specifically to prevent NATO air power from intervening. In any such scenario, speed would be of the essence, as we saw in Crimea, where the key elements of annexation were effectively carried out in a matter of days. Russia’s likely aim would be to present NATO with a fait accompli, to undermine the article 5 guarantee, which Russia would no doubt regard as a meaningful victory.
How should we best respond to this? In May, the Select Committee took evidence from the Secretary of State for Defence, who is in his place, including on our readiness in the UK to respond to a Baltic scenario. He explained that our two high readiness formations, 16 Air Assault Brigade and 3 Commando Brigade, could be deployed to the Baltics in a matter of days, although it would have to be by air and therefore assumes that air heads would still be in friendly hands. In response to questions, he further explained that it would take about 20 days to deploy a mechanised brigade, whereas to deploy a full war fighting division, as envisaged in SDSR 2015, would take about three months, by which time the conflict could very well be all over. It is obvious from those timings that we would need our NATO allies, especially US air power, to seek to hold the ring until heavier reinforcements could arrive.

What is to be done? First, NATO would have to be prepared to fight and win an intense information campaign, in which television cameras would arguably be more powerful than missiles. The Skripal case showed that in fact the west was prepared to stand together quite impressively in response to Russian misinformation, expelling more than 100 Russian diplomats. I believe that really hurt the Russians.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in the era of hybrid warfare and conflict in front of cameras, it is more important than ever that our service personnel feel that if they make difficult decisions in the moment they will be protected through their lives? I raise this because of the intrusion of cameras in conflict.

Mr Speaker: May I gently say that the time limit will have to be reduced for subsequent speakers at this rate? I say that not by way of complaint, but as a piece of information to the House.

Mr Francois: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. In fairness, I understand that the Secretary of State is looking into what can be done on legacy investigations.

Secondly, NATO needs to improve its logistics and its ability to move assets, including heavy armour, to the Baltics in a timely manner. The UK has expressed particular interest in one of the 17 EU projects under PESCO—the permanent structured co-operation framework—specifically, the initiative to look at military mobility across Europe. Would it be worth establishing a NATO stock of flat-bed railway cars that European armies could share to move forces across Europe more quickly?

Thirdly, we need to enhance our collective forward presence by having more countries take part in the rotation of units to share the burden. Importantly, we also need more air defence units in that capacity. As has already been suggested, we may also wish to review our basing of units in Germany, because by remaining there they could have a considerable deterrent effect.

Fourthly, NATO should consider devolving to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe—SACEUR—the authority to sanction precautionary troop movements in a crisis, even when unannounced authority from the NATO ministerial council may not be forthcoming. That was much the case during the cold war, and we may have to re-learn that lesson in the protection of the Baltics.

In summary, as I argued earlier, in response to an act of aggression in Salisbury, the west showed admirable determination and collective will to stand up to Russia. We now need a similar combination of determination, backed up by sound military planning, to effectively deter aggression against NATO’s eastern flank. I hope that we will see evidence of all that at the summit in July.

6.6 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): NATO was one of the great achievements of the 1945 Labour Government. Its creation was pushed through by the tenacity and force of will of Ernie Bevin and Clem Attlee, who had both lived through two world wars—Attlee was wounded at Gallipoli. The creation of NATO was based on our party’s fundamental principles of international co-operation and internationalism, and on the idea of solidarity with other nations. Irrespective of the people who today try to rewrite history, the Labour party has never been a pacifist party. NATO was put in place with the idea that pooling resources to ensure that nations could come together and take a collective approach to defence was the way forward. That idea has passed the test of the past 70 years.

When NATO was founded, the threat was clearly the Soviet Union, as it was right up until the 1990s, and it proved to work well as a deterrent. There is a narrative that says that NATO is now somehow the aggressor. I ask people to cast their minds back to the late 1990s, when NATO was in the driving seat in respect of co-operation with the new Russian state, with the “Partnership for Peace” process and the NATO-Russia Council. People forget that at the 2000 Moscow summit, Putin actually suggested to Bill Clinton that Russia could become part of NATO. There was a great will to ensure that co-operation and peace could move forward.

We live in a very different world today, with a resurgent Russia. Not only is there the cyber-threat, about which Members have spoken eloquently, but Russia is re-arming in respect of its nuclear capability, naval capacity and long-range nuclear missiles. People might ask what NATO’s response to those threats is. Our response has to be the traditional one of preparation and solidarity, and we need to ensure that we have a united front against any threat, including that from Russia.

We saw in the press a couple of weeks ago the cynical, terrible situation whereby the new weapons that are being developed are being test-bedded on the people of Syria. Anyone who tries to tell me that that is a state that is going to look for a peaceful way forward needs only ask the people of Crimea to see what its way forward is. The threats are different now, though, and it is not just about Russia; the threats include Islamist terrorism, failed states and, as has already been mentioned, mass migration and economic disintegration in parts of the world.

Our response has to include—I know that this has already been said—spending, modernisation and ensuring that we deal with the threats that we face, not just on the battlefield, but in cyber-space and in the media. The Russian threat is quite clearly designed in doctrinal...
terms to destabilise the western alliance and it is one to which we need to react. I think that we have been rather slow in reacting to it.

May I also add to what was said by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and make the case for NATO? Most of us who grew up in the cold war really knew what NATO was for. We need to re-emphasise the case for why we need it today—not as an aggressive alliance, but as a body that stands up for the values that we all cherish dearly and have fought for over many generations in this country. I also reiterate the point that Labour is a party that looks outwards, believes in international co-operation, is not pacificist, stands up to aggression where we see it and also works with other nations to ensure that peace and democracy, which we all take for granted, are preserved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches now applies.

6.10 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): As many other Members have said, I regret that the Chancellor is absent today, because I would have liked him to hear some of this. Let me crack on. I am very grateful that we are having this debate today because I know that the organisation has done so much—arguably more than the EU ever has—to secure peace in Europe. NATO is a guarantor of peace in Europe. I agree with the position of Veterans for Britain, which argues that the EU is a consequence of, rather than a cause of, European peace.

I have grown up and, arguably, grown pretty old with the protection of NATO. I can well recall hearing those chilling siren practices that used to be held back in the 1950s in case of nuclear attack. I believe that NATO kept us secure then and continues to do so now. I am, therefore, a very keen supporter of NATO, and am delighted to see that it goes from strength to strength, which is exemplified by the upcoming summit in Brussels.

All of the advances that will happen in Brussels are a direct response to the growing threat from Russia, but we must be mindful that Russia is not necessarily the only threat that we face. Flexibility in this matter is important. We should celebrate our unity, because, as laid out in article 5, if one of us is threatened, all of us are threatened. That is the basis of NATO. Although we should be proud of our contribution in the past, we must now step up to the plate and be prepared to take a more significant role in NATO post Brexit. In order to do that, we must boost our defence expenditure towards the 3% of GDP target that the Defence Committee recommended this week.

I know that the Minister will seek to reassure me that the 2% commitment is a floor, not a ceiling, but we must pick our hard-working armed forces up off that floor and, in doing so, show them that we appreciate them and that we will address the financial challenges that they have been facing for far too long. This is as much a question of morale as it is of military and cyber hardware. My visit earlier this year to Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose showed me that. The personnel there were a fantastic, determined group of people who were operating from a base that an estate agent might describe as in need of TLC—and we all know what that means. That is what I found at Culdrose.

We must maintain our status as a credible military power, because we are currently in danger of stalling instead of accelerating. If we do not accelerate, the world will become a more dangerous place. The disarmament and appeasement of the 1930s showed us that. What is more, the additional resources are necessary to keep this country safe. I will bug out now with a minute to spare, Mr Speaker.

6.14 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I remind the Chamber once again that I have a child who is a serving officer in our armed forces.

I crue your indulgence, Mr Speaker, so that I may share a short memory with the Chamber. When I was at school in the highlands, my parents went away for some days and I was sent to stay with two elderly ladies called Miss Dorothy Mackenzie and Miss Catherine Mackenzie. One day—I remember that it was March—I came back from my day school to find the two old ladies in tears. I was very embarrassed about this. There on the table was a yellowing cutting from the Ross-shire Journal, announcing the death of their brother, who had died in March 1918 in the Germans’ last big push. He went to Tain Royal Academy, and went from there to Fettes, the alma mater of one Anthony Blair. After that, he won an exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford—a spectacular entry to higher education. In fact, he entered Balliol higher up than a much better known graduate of the college: one Harold Macmillan, who graced these Benches.

I was extraordinarily embarrassed by these old ladies, but the experience taught me a very sharp lesson about the reality of losing a sibling in war. Now that I am the age that I am, those school days are actually longer ago than the memory of the ladies’ brother was to them. They still saw him as the young man with that great future before him, who might one day walk in and say hello. I tell this tale because it reminds me that we in Europe were killing one another for hundreds of years. That is why, as has already been said, membership of NATO has never been more important when it comes to these relations. We should not forget that.

I am glad just to have this opportunity. I am lucky to be here to tell this tale and to honour the memory of a brave man in Hunsard, which is about the best thing I can do.

I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I represent a constituency at the top of Scotland, and I often wonder which Russian naval vessels are there, beyond the horizon. The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who is no longer in his place, puts it extremely well indeed: we have an absolute duty to sell to our constituents, particularly the younger generation, what NATO is about and why it is crucial that we are a member, and why—yes, I agree with other hon. Members—we should increase our expenditure on the defence of this country.

6.16 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): NATO would simply be too slow to defend against a Russian force in somewhere like Estonia or Latvia. The Russians would beat us to the draw. The alliance’s much quoted article 5 is, in fact, a commitment to consult, but not a commitment to act.
I wonder how long such a decision might take, and that would be before we deployed one single person, apart from possibly the high readiness force.

Since 2014, NATO has established this very high readiness taskforce, which our 20th Armoured Infantry Brigade currently leads. But I am very suspicious of words in military titles such as “very high readiness”. I reckon that it is a case of wishful thinking. This organisation deploys at the speed of a striking slug. A RAND study in 2016 concluded that the Russians would sweep through the Baltic states within 60 hours, which is about the time that the very high readiness taskforce would be thinking about getting on its transport to go to the Baltics.

It is good that NATO has four multinational battlegroups: in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. We are the lead nation in Estonia, with a battlegroup headquarters and troops, and we also contribute a company group in Poland. But these forces are a trip wire, like my battalion was in 1970 to 1972 in Berlin, when we were surrounded by the East Germans and the Russians. They are obviously hostages to fortune. An attack on them should trigger NATO action.

I am a big supporter of NATO. It binds 28 states together and gives us common purpose. But in any high intensity war, NATO would have to change hugely. It is not good enough to fight at the moment, and it would have to change very fast indeed if it were actually to do the very dirty business of killing the enemy and winning the war.

6.20 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am really grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate ahead of the NATO summit in Brussels in a few weeks’ time. Now is also an opportune time to make clear to our NATO allies the importance of strengthening the collective maritime strategy.

With much military activity off the coast of Scotland, now at levels not seen since the cold war, it is imperative that we put a renewed focus on our security interests in the north. As the Defence Secretary acknowledged during an evidence session in the Defence Committee on 22 May, we are seeing much more activity in the high north. Indeed, the Royal United Services Institute, in its 2017 paper “NATO and the North Atlantic”, issued a warning that “the North Atlantic—and in particular the Arctic—is an increasingly important part of Russian military strategic calculation, as evidenced by its growing defence modernisation efforts as well as naval and air prowess. It is therefore essential that the North Atlantic region comes to be seen as being central to NATO’s own strategic interests and be a recipient of more NATO assets.”

Despite such warnings, there was no mention whatsoever of the north Atlantic and the high north in the 2015 strategic defence and security review. This is a poor reflection on the UK Government’s ability to effectively prioritise and plan our future security requirements. The new modernising defence programme must address this issue to ensure that we are fully protected against rising Russian threats in this area. Not only that, but we need to protect our oil and gas interests, underwater cabling, renewable energy and fishing, as well as the new and increasingly important tourist activity in the Arctic as it becomes a much more interesting destination for many tourists.

In 2010, the then Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), decided to scrap the RAF’s Nimrod maritime surveillance fleet, severely constraining our ability to locate Russian submarines off the coast of Scotland. That decision was remarkably reckless and left the UK in a tremendously weak position at one of its most vulnerable frontiers. We have had no choice but to allow others to pick up the slack, such as the Americans, the French, the Norwegians and the Canadians, who have had maritime patrol aircraft entering UK airspace in recent years. At the end of last year, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach warned that “our anti-submarine warfare capability has been seriously neglected” due to underfunding. He urged the UK to “develop our maritime forces with our allies to match Russian fleet modernisation.”

Yet we are still waiting for the full P8 fleet to be delivered. The UK’s lack of maritime patrol aircraft is both embarrassing and dangerous. This must change and change soon.

Scotland is strategically located to host the new NATO maritime command base. Scotland’s proximity and accessibility to the north Atlantic makes it a prime location to form a vital link between western Europe and North America, and to cover the Greenland-Iceland-Shetland gap. I conveyed my views on this proposal to the Minister for Europe and the Americas during my Westminster Hall debate on the appointment of an Arctic ambassador last November, and I make the case again today. The east of Scotland is by far the best option for a new base. I hope that the Secretary of State will make such representations to our allies at the NATO summit in July. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that commitment.

I urge the Secretary of State to work with our NATO allies at the Brussels summit to rethink our collective defence and to put a renewed maritime strategy at the top of the NATO agenda.

6.24 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, in which there has been such agreement on the importance of NATO’s contribution to the world since its formation nearly 70 years ago.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has been the pivotal organisation and the bond that has held together the freedom-loving nations of Europe and North America, maintained peace in the west of our continent and contributed to peacekeeping and nation-building exercises around the world. In many ways, its name is something of a misnomer, for as we sit here today, there is not an inhabited continent on this earth—from the plains of Afghanistan to the Balkans or the seas off east Africa—that does not have some form of NATO or NATO allies present, enhancing the security of the region and defending our common interests.

As has been said, the threats that face our country and our allies are increasing in scale and scope. In 1946, three years before NATO was formed but in a speech that certainly encouraged the Truman Administration to commit to sharing the burden of keeping Europe whole, free and at peace, Churchill famously spoke of the iron curtain descending across Europe, of the then Soviet sphere and of increasing measures of control.
Notwithstanding the appalling scenes we have seen in America that none of us could or would seek to defend, it is so important that the US is given the credit it deserves for the work it does to defend the security of our continent and the world. The Secretary-General of NATO, Mr Stoltenberg, wrote yesterday in the paper:

“In fact, since coming to office, the Trump administration has increased funding for the US presence in Europe by 40%. The last US battle tank left Europe in 2013 but now they’re back in the form of a whole new US armoured brigade.”

That is the sort of thing my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) was talking about. It does not seek to justify the American President or defend what he is doing in America, but it points to the facts of what not only the President but the generals and the armed forces of the United States are doing to work with us to secure our freedoms.

I say to the Secretary of State, and I make no apology for this, that this House is united in saying to him that whatever the arguments—about 2%, 2.3% and 2.5%, or about who is doing what and who is not—the fact is that our country needs to spend more on its defence and more resources are needed. As I have said in previous debates, as a Labour politician, I say to the Secretary of State that I support him, as my Front Benchers do, in seeking more resources from the Treasury. That should not of course be at the expense of the health service or of schools, but it does mean that we have to find such resources to defend our country.

Let me say that there will be significant challenges at the upcoming NATO summit. I do not have the time to go through them all, but let me tell the Secretary of State about one of them. Article 5—collective defence—is fundamental to the principle of NATO, but does it apply to cyber-warfare? As Lord Jopling has said, does there need to be a new article 5B? These are immense issues for NATO to consider at its summit.

In the half a minute or so that I have left, I say to the Secretary of State that we are losing the battle with the British public about why we should spend more money on defence and about what threats our country faces. My constituents do not believe that they face a threat of attack from Russia. They do not believe that Russian submarines coming into the North sea adjacent to Scotland are a threat, but we have to persuade them that it is a threat. We have to explain what is going on and why it is a threat. They see terrorism as a threat, but they have to understand NATO’s purpose and what threats we face. How we explain that to them will determine whether we get more resources.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the remaining speakers on my list speak for a little short of four minutes, Mr Thomson would also have a chance. I appeal to your natural generosity of spirit. I call Mr Alec Shelbrooke.

6.31 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): This has been a very wide-ranging and cross-party debate, with Members agreeing on many areas. In the brief time I have, I want to raise one issue that worries me immensely about the future of NATO and how it operates. We will need more time on the Floor of the House for this, which I will seek from the Leader of the House during
business questions at some point. It is the issue of PESCO—the permanent structured co-operation of the European Union.

There must be an honest conversation, in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly at least, about how NATO’s command and control structures will actually work given the adoption of PESCO, which was signed on 11 December 2017. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a point about how long it would take to get a security force into the Baltic states, but that is not actually what NATO is for. It is there as a reinforcement force, and a state should be able to hold the line for 72 hours before NATO comes in and defends it, although that is probably not long enough.

As I see it, there is a problem with PESCO. I urge colleagues to go away and read article 42 of the Lisbon treaty. Specifically, it says of “a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides”, that the Council “shall in that case recommend to the Member States the adoption of such a decision in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.”

The phrase “their respective constitutional requirements” creates one of the problems in that constitutionally, in German law, Germany cannot be part of an aggressive pact. There are therefore question marks in relation to the operation of PESCO.

PESCO seeks to do many of the things that people recognise that NATO should do, including purchasing equipment efficiently and using it in the best way, but that actually clashes with the constitutional restraints on some NATO states. If the argument for PESCO is about having a European border force, are all European nations going to sign up to it in a way that means they will enforce the direction the Italians are now going in?

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alec Shelbrooke: I will not give way.

I believe we need at a future date to spend time in the House discussing the relationship between PESCO and NATO in order to advise the NATO Parliamentary Assembly how to take this forward.

Mr Speaker: That is extremely generous of the hon. Gentleman.

6.34 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): We have got towards the end of a defence debate, with all the defence family here, and no one has said the word “Plymouth”, so it seems only appropriate that I should rise to my feet and talk about Plymouth.

First, however, I want Members to cast their minds back a few years. Before I was the wonderful silver fox that Members see in front of them, I had brown hair, and back in 2004 I was at the NATO summit in Istanbul. It was there that my real affection for NATO was formed and that I understood how important it is that we co-operate across borders and are ready to face the threats coming our way.

Warfare is changing—no one is denying that it is changing—and we must keep an eye on the future. NATO needs to be flexible and adaptable, but if I am honest, it has been too hard and too structured to respond to some of its needs. It was too inflexible after the terrorist threats we saw from 2001 onwards, and it is still a little too inflexible. To return to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made, it does not seem able to cope with understanding how hybrid warfare and online and cyber-threats face us as an alliance, and it needs to.

We know that there is increased Russian activity threatening the alliance. We know that there is a very real risk of Russian cyber-attacks in the UK, and there have been such attacks on our NATO allies. However, article 5 has not been triggered, which means that we are in this limbo land, where the Russians are getting away with these things, but if we were using the tactics prevalent 100 years ago, they would have been in a conflict. We need to understand that threat.

As well as understanding what is being done with hybrid warfare to destabilise our allies, we need to understand the use of drones and swarm warfare, which Russia is practising and using in Syria, as well as the increase in its military activities elsewhere and in the weaponising of migration.

We need to keep an eye on our high-end capabilities. In particular, I want briefly to talk about the maritime role. In Devonport, we have a world-class dockyard, a world-class naval base and skills that we really need. With increased Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic, the anti-submarine warfare of the Type 23s and the Type 26s, which I hope those on the Government Front Bench will announce are coming to Devonport shortly, is absolutely essential, as is understanding how we can counter the rise in Russian surface fleet activity and under-sea cable spy ships, which are an increasing threat, but which are not often spoken about in this place.

We also need to protect our amphibious capabilities. The UK has fantastic amphibious capability in Albion, Bulwark and the Royal Marines, and we need to make sure that that is protected in the modernising defence review that is coming. In terms of the ministerial assurances that Albion and Bulwark will go out of service in 2033 and 2034, I hope that that commitment will be maintained in the modernising defence review, when it is published next month.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We have heard already this afternoon that Russian activity in the high north and the Black sea has reached levels not seen since the cold war. The NATO summit must be used to discuss and strengthen the alliance’s maritime strategy. The Russian activity off Scotland’s west coast is now at critical level. Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach has warned that British anti-submarine capability has been seriously neglected due to underfunding.
The scrapping of the Nimrod fleet in 2010 has left us unable to react to the emerging Russian threat. We must ensure that we, as a NATO member, remain agile enough to respond to future threats, wherever and whatever they may be.

I was in Romania recently as part of a parliamentary delegation, and concerns were raised repeatedly about Russian activity in the Black sea. The annexation of Crimea has given Russia a launch platform in the Black sea, which has already enabled it to intensify air and sea activities in the area. That, of course, is also a threat to oil and gas pipelines.

Romania is grateful that the UK has sent Typhoons to the Black sea as part of the NATO mission, but Russia continues to flex its muscles in the Ukraine and northern Moldova. It courts NATO members in the Balkans and Turkey, and floods other eastern European countries with propaganda.

Romania is pressing for the Black sea to be a specific agenda item at the summit. That, however, has been repeatedly blocked by Turkey—a NATO member that is getting far too close to Russia. I urge the Secretary of State to support Romania’s calls for a frank discussion of the Black sea at the summit.

Finally, I echo the comments from the hon. Members for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). Many Members have viewed with horror the pictures of children who have been cruelly ripped from their parents’ arms. Their cries and distress will be hard for us to forget, and this pernicious policy has no place anywhere in the world. I urge the Secretary of State to use any influence he has as a fellow NATO member to send a clear message to President Trump that his actions are not endorsed by the Bible, that we in the UK unequivocally condemn them and that children should never be used as pawns in a political game.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) could confine himself to four minutes or less, that would be appreciated by the House. I call Ross Thomson.

6.39 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): NATO was born during the cold war when signatories to the treaty were united by their fear of Soviet aggression, which had been exacerbated by the Berlin blockade. They sought to deter that aggression by working in partnership with America, which protected them through the possession of an atomic bomb. Under article 5, an attack against one was an attack against all, which is why collective defence is situated at the very heart of NATO’s founding treaty. NATO, however, is more than just a military organisation. It is also a political organisation that seeks to promote democratic values. It is a vehicle for promoting democracy, individual rights, freedom and the rule of law.

In 2006, NATO members agreed to commit a minimum of 2% of their GDP to spending on defence, to demonstrate political will towards collective defence and to ensure that each member’s defence capacity is reflective of NATO’s overall military capability. In 2014, members signed up to the defence investment pledge, calling on all members not already meeting the 2% spending guideline to stop their cuts to defence budgets and move to 2% within a decade. Frustratingly, far too few NATO member states make significant contributions to the hardware of NATO. Six of the G7 which are in NATO do not do that. The United States spends more on defence than the other 28 members put together. Only four NATO allies spend 2% of their economic output on defence, including the United Kingdom. It is incredible that the richest country in Europe, Germany, spends only 1.2% of its GDP on defence. Understandably, Angela Merkel’s offer to raise that to 1.5% is seen by Washington as insultingly low. It is reasonable for the US to expect its European partners in NATO to contribute more, which is why successive US Presidents have been losing their patience.

There is a new global reality in security and NATO needs to adapt its capabilities to deal with threats. NATO now recognises that cyber-attacks are possible grounds for invoking article 5, meaning that weak national cyber-defences are a potential invitation to a wider conflict. Member states therefore need to build up their own strength and resilience on this front. It is important that we seek a common minimum standard of hybrid defence spending, as it is so varied across Europe.

NATO, not the EU, has been the foundation of Europe’s security. NATO is a source of hope and a safeguard of democracy and freedom. That is why it is vital for the UK to remain a proud contributor to NATO and to take a leadership role to renew NATO to meet the security challenges of today’s global reality, so that we can preserve peace and global freedom.

6.43 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate. Eighteen Members have spoken and there have been many constructive interventions. My apologies to the House if I fail to mention all the Members who have spoken. The debate has displayed a wide range of knowledge. Members have spoken with passion and sincerity. I am delighted that Plymouth has been mentioned. The debate has also been largely bipartisan in tone and content. I very much take on board the very good point made by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who said it was imperative for us all to have as much unity as possible in this important area. There has been a high degree of consensus.

This is an important time for NATO. As we have heard, NATO’s origins go back to 1949. We on the Labour Benches are very proud that the likes of Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin in particular played an important role in NATO’s formation. Today, the threats which NATO was established in response to are very different, but they are clear threats that we ignore at our peril. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and many other Members accurately referred to Russia’s increasingly aggressive activities. We have seen the recent actions of Russia in Ukraine, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the destabilising cyber-activity of Russia in a number of countries, not least Estonia.

On the weekend before last, it was my pleasure to attend a festival of military music in Cardiff. This was a marvellous display of music, performed with vitality and precision. It also gave me the opportunity to speak to soldiers of the Royal Welsh who served with the Royal Welsh in Estonia. As we have heard from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State,
the number of UK personnel routinely deployed in Estonia is now around 800. Our troops are working alongside French personnel and, before long, Danish personnel. This enhanced forward presence, and tailored forward presence, is vital to ensuring that NATO provides strong defence and a clear deterrence.

Significant as this eastern European theatre is, it is also important to be aware that Russia is becoming increasingly assertive in other areas as well, notably in the Arctic. Members hardly need reminding that we have seen ever-increasing military activity close to the United Kingdom. British fighter pilots, jets and warships have responded to Russian military activity near the UK more than 160 times since 2010 and, only a couple of weeks ago, a Royal Navy destroyer was deployed to escort a Russian underwater reconnaissance ship after it approached the UK coast.

At the end of 2016, along with my Front-Bench colleagues, I visited the NATO headquarters in Brussels. I was impressed by both the collegiate nature of the organisation and its accurate estimation of the growing Russian threat. Not only is Russia increasing the numerical strength of its armed forces, but it is increasing its organisation and its accurate estimation of the growing threat.

In this context, the NATO summit in Brussels in July will be of tremendous importance. There will be important discussions, especially on the creation of a new command structure to deal with maritime security and the threat that is posed in the north Atlantic. A number of Members have made their support known very strongly for these developments.

NATO is a vital alliance. We live in a dangerous and uncertain world, and we need to ensure that NATO speaks with one voice and acts as an effective alliance. All of us in this House agree that NATO is important but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) eloquently said, we must all make sure that we put the case for NATO to the people of this country to make sure that there is not only understanding, but full support.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to wind up this debate. I intend to carry on from the very constructive way in which the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) wound up for Her Majesty’s Opposition. We have indeed had a constructive, passionate and wide-ranging debate. I am grateful to hon. Members for their ongoing and active engagement with these important issues, especially as we approach the NATO summit in Brussels next month.

I declare an interest. As a reservist of some 30 years, I have vivid memories of my own NATO experience, serving on NATO operations in Kosovo, Bosnia and Afghanistan. That experience left me with a profound appreciation for the difference the alliance can make in the world. Today, as a Minister, I have been privileged to see how both our civilian and our military personnel, whether at NATO headquarters or deployed on operations, continue to champion the global good. I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to all those who have served NATO with distinction, not just today, but in days gone by. They are the bedrock of our defence.

Hon. Members have made a number of important points today and I will endeavour to deal with them but, if I do not get to everyone, I will write to those concerned. I hope they will understand if I do not take interventions, unless they are absolutely vital, because otherwise I will have no chance of dealing with everyone. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) started, rightly, by demonstrating the common values we share across the Chamber. I do not intend to break with that by taking a partisan approach to this debate, and I do not doubt for one second her Front-Bench team’s commitment to defence—the same commitment we have heard in every speech today—but she will understand why there is concern in the House about some of the historical comments her leader has made, which is why I hope all Labour Members will do their bit to maintain the consensus on how we move forward.

The hon. Lady rightly highlighted the need for interoperability. As she will be aware, this morning the Royal United Services Institute land warfare conference took place, at which I spoke. I was delighted to highlight how 3rd Division, very much the core of our land forces, divisions being the smallest formation at which the full orchestra of war can be used, recently operated on the Warfighter exercise in the United States. Some 1,400 British personnel plugged very effectively into the US 18th Airborne Corps, fighting alongside the US 4th Division, demonstrating how we are completely interoperable, as a tier one nation, with our US allies.

Crucial to that, as we move forward with MDP, is the perhaps less glamorous side to MDP: our ability, and the necessity, to invest in our communications infrastructure, such as Morpheus, an open architecture communications system. Rather than nations buying closed architecture systems, which do not communicate with each other, we have to move forward in this modernised way.

The hon. Lady was also concerned about the future of the DSACEUR. I can reassure her that there is no link to Brexit. We hold that post simply because we, as the UK, are the second-largest contributor to NATO.
I can only repeat the Prime Minister’s words at Munich, where she said our support for European security was unconditional.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) highlighted the importance of working with allies, and of course that is very much in the spirit of the NATO summit. Almost every hon. Member across the House highlighted the need for 2% to be a floor, and almost every voice wanted to see that increase. That sends an incredibly powerful message from this Parliament. I will not get drawn into an argument about how we define spending; I can only say that we follow the NATO standards and that we are committed to increasing the defence budget by 0.5% above inflation each year.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) highlighted how we can now add cyber and space to the traditional domains of land, air and sea. Indeed, several hon. Members asked about that challenge. I am pleased to say that NATO has recognised cyber as a domain and agreed that it could be a reason to trigger article 5—article 5 already provides for that—but that is not to say that we should avoid discussing Lord Hague’s comments about an article 5B; indeed, it is probably vital that we do discuss them.

Along with the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), the hon. Gentleman also highlighted the importance of the high north, our appreciation of it and our need to operate in it. In March, I was delighted to be able to join HMS Trenchant on Ice Exercise, and to spend two days underneath the north pole, under the ice. It is a remarkable experience, especially coming back up through the ice. That, I hope, is a clear demonstration of how seriously we take this threat, and we will of course continue to operate up there. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West also mentioned concern about our aerial reconnaissance: that is why we are buying our new P-8 aircraft, which will be located at Lossiemouth.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: No, I will not.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) for what he did as Defence Secretary. It was an honour to serve under him, and he did much to move this agenda forward. He spoke about the opportunity that the summit would bring us, and, in particular—this related very much to the agenda of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe—about the 360° approach that NATO must take. He pointed out that, given the approach of the west Balkan summit, which the UK will host, we must maintain our open-door policy.

I was delighted that the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) mentioned the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, an organisation that is close to my heart. I seem to be inviting the hon. Lady to go to lots of places at the moment, but, as she probably knows, that organisation still exists and operates from Lincoln’s Inn, and she should really go and see it, if she would like to. She also spoke of the need, under NATO, to take a comprehensive approach and to work closely with organisations such as the Department for International Development. Intervention in fragile states upstream—the spending of 0.7% of gross national income on aid—can have a great influence on the prevention of conflict and all the unnecessary issues that it brings, and prevent defence action downstream.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) made a powerful comparison between what is happening now and the advent of air power 100 years ago. At the time the Army did not see the benefit of our air power, apart from, perhaps, a bit of reconnaissance, but, 100 years on, we see that that was a pivotal point. One of my concerns, about which I feel strongly, is that I do not want us to find ourselves, in 10 years’ time, looking in our rear-view mirror and wishing that we had seized the opportunity of cyber to a greater extent.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: Oh, all right, I will, but I have only two minutes left.

Nick Smith: I thank the Minister. His right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary told the Defence Committee recently that we would be leaders in cyber. Will he please elaborate on that?

Mark Lancaster: I will. I think that we are leaders in cyber. That was discussed during Defence questions. As was said then, we have invested £1.9 billion in cyber, and in March we opened the new state-of-the-art Defence Cyber School in Shrivenham. I am determined that cyber skills will be a key component for all members of our armed forces.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) highlighted concerns about President Trump and his commitment to NATO. I will simply say that I agree with the hon. Members for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), both of whom rightly said that we should judge the United States by its actions and not by its words. I have seen for myself just what the US has been doing in Poland in recent weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) underlined the need for us to continue our security relationship with our European allies post Brexit. The hon. Member for Bridgend and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) were absolutely right to highlight the need for us to continue to educate people about the value of NATO.

Both my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about the Baltic states and their concerns about the need for a responsive NATO. Of course, this assumes that the UK is acting in isolation from a standing start, but NATO has graduated response plans to implement once its situational awareness indicators and warnings have identified the need to act. However, they were absolutely right about the concerns in that area, which is why we are at the forefront of pressing NATO to modernise its political, institutional and military capabilities to address the challenges that we face.

Other Members made extremely valuable contributions. I am very conscious of time. If I have the opportunity, I will write to them after the debate. NATO’s enhanced forward presence has been on the ground for over a year, with the UK playing a leading role, and if we can build on those successes, sharpening NATO’s focus,
winning collective commitment for investment in better equipment, bigger budgets and less red tape, and remaining even more united in our resolve in the face of those who seek only to divide us, together, we will ensure the alliance remains what it has been for almost 70 years, not just to our nation but to the west as a whole—a great beacon of hope.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NATO.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

That the draft Official Statistics Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—(Mr Richard Goodwill.)

PETITION

Charlton Boulevard

7 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I rise to present a petition of residents of south Gloucestershire. It is mirrored by a similar petition with over 500 signatures soon to be presented to South Gloucestershire Council.

The petition of residents of South Gloucestershire,

Declares that local residents have great concern over the proposal to make Charlton Boulevard into a bus only lane, and the resulting effect this will have on local congestion.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage South Gloucestershire Council, and all stakeholders in Charlton Hayes traffic planning to reassess the planned route.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002156]

UK Development Bank

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr Richard Goodwill.)

7.1 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I start by declaring my interest as chair of the international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

In this debate I will put forward the strong case for the United Kingdom to establish a development bank. I believe it is needed now more than ever, and for two particular reasons. As we leave the European Union we will also leave the European Investment Bank as a shareholder. That bank is based in London and has provided large sums of very important capital to projects throughout the UK, not least the Thames tideway tunnel not a million miles away from here and being developed right at this moment. I realise that this particular area does not fall within the Minister’s responsibilities, but they do cover the context of an international development bank, and both the UK aspect of development, which is at present done through the EIB quite considerably, and the international aspect of development financing can come through the same institution; in fact, that would probably be mutually beneficial.

We are one of the few major countries in the world that does not have its own development bank, whereas France has the Agence Française de Développement, or AFD, the Germans have the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, or KfW, and many other countries also have development banks, often on a very substantial scale. I shall address that point later.

As one of the major challenges the world currently faces, alongside climate change and the environment, is the creation of jobs and livelihoods, particularly for young people, a development bank is needed more than ever. The World Bank estimates that at least 600 million jobs need to be created in the next 10 or so years globally; my estimate is that well over 1 billion new jobs are needed. It is estimated that the population of sub-Saharan Africa will double between now and 2060, to 2.4 billion. If we do not tackle the question of economic development and livelihood-creation around the world and support countries to ensure that their young people have opportunities there, the migration crisis of 2015 onwards will be chicken feed compared with what we will see in future. That is of huge relevance to those young people who are forced to take perilous journeys, and also of great concern to nations in Europe, such as the UK, and elsewhere which will be forced to countenance huge migration on a scale we have not yet seen even in the last few years. This is not a theoretical question of whether it would be nice to have such an institution; it is absolutely fundamental for the development of major public and private projects in the United Kingdom and internationally that we establish a UK development bank, and the sooner the better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I spoke to him earlier to get an idea of what this was about, and I congratulate him on bringing forward the debate. I have seen too many cases in my constituency of small businesses that are cash poor and asset rich and that are unable to make...
payments of even 1p more than the required amount. Does he agree that a development bank such as the one he has outlined that was friendly to small businesses and enterprises would encourage the bigger banks to remember their duty not only to the bottom line but to their local communities, which we represent, and to trust them to do the right thing with their money? Also, if he was looking for somewhere for this investment bank, would he agree that Belfast would be a great place for it?

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman is right, although I am sure that many places will bid for it when it is established, as I hope it will be.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I work with him on the all-party parliamentary group on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Is he aware that in Scotland, Scottish Enterprise has established the Scottish Investment Bank to provide the kind of domestic support that he describes? Perhaps that could be expanded in a co-operative manner. Will he say a little more about his concept for a global international development bank to tackle global poverty? In particular, will he make it clear that the loans would be for projects and infrastructure, and that there would not be a return to the days of significant loans to Governments, which led to the debt crisis in the 1970s and 1980s? Does he agree that this would involve a different kind of financing?

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that we do not want a return to the days when countries were burdened with unpayable debts that eventually had to be relieved, at great cost to the countries themselves and to taxpayers around the world. He rightly points out that there are such financial institutions around the United Kingdom. I was not aware of the Scottish Investment Bank, but it is great to hear about it. No doubt that model could be built on.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Before he moves on to the international aspect, does he agree that, in the light of Brexit, this country will need an investment bank? Let us not forget that we trade a great deal, and that trade creates jobs in other countries as well. We will lose regional aid in 2021 as a result of Brexit, and that aid is vital to the midlands in industrial and development terms. He is a midlands MP, and I think he would agree with me on that.

Jeremy Lefroy: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why I am saying that the development bank should be for development in the UK and globally—not one or the other, but both. The two are intimately entwined, as he rightly suggests.

We already have a financial institution that deals with investment in developing countries. It is the CDC—formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation—and it does a fine job. The Government have increased its capital, with the support of Parliament, over the past few years, and I welcome that, but that largely involves equity. There are some loans as well, but it largely involves equity and mostly operates in the private sector. A development bank would deal with the public and private sectors, and it would concentrate on long-term loans that would eventually be repaid, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) suggested.

A development bank has three advantages over a grant-making organisation, which the Department for International Development generally is. DFID does a fine job in many areas, but it works largely with grants. Long-term development loans would offer accountability over a long period. When I was a member of the International Development Committee, I sometimes used to ask what DFID had been doing in a particular country 15 or 20 years previously. That was difficult to know, because projects tended to last two, three, five or, at the most, 10 years. There are some fantastic exceptions such as the community forestry project in Nepal, which has been going for decades and has done a great job, but projects tend to be relatively short term. With a long-term loan, development can be tracked, and there is accountability and regular reporting, meaning that we can see year-on-year results for the financing.

Secondly, and obviously, the finance is returnable. It is recyclable. It can be used more than once. In round 18 of the replenishment of the International Development Association, which is the World Bank’s fund for the poorest countries, a substantial percentage of the money—well over 35%—was returned funds from previous loans. The IDA was able to raise around $75 billion, with round 18, which runs for three years, and a large percentage of that was money that had come back in repayments. About a third of it was new grants of course, but that shows just how much leverage a development bank has because it uses returned funds. It is not about grants.

Thirdly, a development bank can raise money on the markets through bonds, and I will give the example of the AFD—the French development bank. Members may be interested to know that it was formed in London in 1941 during the darkest days of the second world war. General de Gaulle wanted a bank to promote development, particularly in French overseas territories, but also presumably in France when it was liberated. So a development bank has been founded here, but it was French, and I long to see a UK development bank founded here.

My proposal is to establish a development bank both for the UK and for developing countries. Funding would come from several sources, including the return of our capital in the European Investment Bank and from the international development budget—it would be a legitimate use of that. We are already rightly putting significant sums into the CDC, which is another form of returnable capital. The International Development Committee has considered the matter and recommended it in at least one report over the past few years. I remember being part of the discussions and the general consensus was that a development bank was something that the UK lacked and needed. We have a fantastic organisation for making grants overseas through DFID—it is probably the best in the world—and we have an excellent organisation for equity capital investing in the private sector through CDC, but we lack that middle, which the French, the Germans, the Japanese, the Brazilians and many others have.

Let me tackle one or two of the arguments against a development bank. One argument is that we already subscribe to development banks—such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank—so we do not need one. We do have influence with those banks, but we do not control them and cannot specify where their money goes. Clearly, they could not lend money into the United Kingdom.
The second is that such banks are not really what the UK does, and the Treasury views them as anathema. Well, that can no longer be said, because the Treasury supported the establishment of the British Business Bank and the Green Investment Bank over the past half-dozen years. Both have been successful, and I believe that the British Business Bank has a portfolio worth at least £9 billion after a relatively short time. The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned the Scottish Investment Bank, which is based in Glasgow. We already have some examples, but I am talking about something on a larger scale and with a larger remit.

The final argument is about the use of taxpayers’ money. I have already said that I am not suggesting that large sums of new taxpayers’ money should go into a development bank; I am suggesting that existing streams could be put into such a bank. In respect of our official development assistance budget, it would seem to me an extremely good use of aid to recycle—I use that word again—development aid through a development bank, because it would mean that it could be used more than once. In fact, DFID already does that through various projects, in which it is called returnable capital. I know that the Treasury has wanted to see DFID do more with returnable capital, and this is certainly one way in which it can.

The European Investment Bank will be leaving us—sadly, in my opinion, but it will be—and here is an opportunity for us to replace it, and to replace it with something that would be very beneficial to the United Kingdom economy and to the world globally. We are a world leader in finance, and this gives us an opportunity to show our innovation and expertise in a type of finance of which the United Kingdom perhaps has not done so much in the past few years.

The United Kingdom now has an opportunity, let us seize it. There is a lot of support for this on both sides of the House. Let us take this opportunity, and let us take it quickly.

7.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on securing this debate and on his thoughtful speech, which was laden with his experience and expertise in this subject. This timely debate allows me to emphasise the importance of the UK’s role in international development generally. We have a statutory commitment to development, with a focus on the very poorest people in the world.

Many developing countries have been experiencing rapid economic growth over a sustained period, leading to rising per capita incomes in those countries. That progress has improved millions of people’s daily lives, and the UK can feel proud of our ongoing contribution to economic development around the world.

But we cannot simply step away as countries transition to middle-income country status. They still face substantial poverty and inequality challenges, and progress is often precarious. Economic and political shocks have resulted in dramatic reversals, even in relatively prosperous countries. A defining challenge—I recognise my hon. Friend’s personal contribution here—is to create mass numbers of productive and good jobs for the many millions of young people who need real economic opportunities to meet their aspirations, to provide for their families and to take their countries forward.

Sustaining economic progress is important not just for these countries but for whole regions and for global issues that directly affect the UK, as set out in the Department for International Development’s economic development strategy, which has a focus on jobs, investment and trade. The type of financing and support these countries want is also evolving. As countries get richer, they are better able to finance their own development. They are able to transition away from grant support for basic service provision and business environment reform and move towards mobilising private sector capital for investment.

Indeed, the economic development strategy, which the Department launched last year, sets out our clear ambition to support countries in transforming their economies and attracting much-needed finance for their private sectors. As my hon. Friend recognises, this House agreed last year to allow the Government to invest more equity into the CDC so it can invest more in companies in Africa and south Asia in key sectors such as infrastructure, financial services and agriculture that create jobs across the economy. Between 2014 and the end of 2016 alone, companies backed by the CDC in those two regions created an estimated 3 million direct and indirect jobs—that is 1 million jobs a year, on average.

These countries also have a continuing need for long-term public sector investment, but many are unable to finance it from domestic resources and have insufficient access to external commercial borrowing on affordable terms, particularly to support infrastructure development at scale so they can readily address the challenges they face meeting the sustainable development goals.

My hon. Friend mentioned, and the House will be aware, that a $13 billion capital increase for the World Bank Group was agreed in principle earlier this year, of which the UK contribution will be £390 million. As part of that, this Government negotiated and secured a commitment to better pricing from the World Bank Group. Discussions are also likely to start next year about a possible capital increase at the African Development Bank.

Capital increases for multilateral institutions such as those can be counted as ODA, according to the OECD committee’s rules. In contrast, capitalising a bilateral sovereign lending institution such as the UK development bank would not be considered ODA. Instead only a proportion of each loan from the bank would be considered ODA, depending on the level of concessionality and the type of country borrowing. The £1 billion UK prosperity fund, which targets middle income countries, is, on the other hand, 100% ODA, because it is grant-funded technical assistance.

So the question in front of us is whether our own approach needs to evolve further to match country needs. That could mean, as countries become better off, a shift away from grant assistance towards other forms of partnership, other financial instruments and helping to leverage other financial flows. Different countries have different needs and we need to consider how best to deploy different instruments in different places.
As I said, this debate is therefore very timely. A UK development bank is one of a range of possible new instruments that could be considered. I noted that hon. Members got in some early lobbying about locations for this still hypothetical and possible new instrument. The Government have a range of instruments available to them to support developing countries. The Secretary of State for International Development has asked officials to explore what new instruments could be developed to meet the changing needs of countries as they get richer and give the UK greater flexibility to respond to individual country needs.

These are complex issues that require careful and detailed consideration, and the work is still at a very early stage. However, in considering all options for potential new instruments, including a development bank, the Government will need to be satisfied on a range of issues. First, such an instrument would have to ensure very clear value for money for taxpayers. Any option involving a new institution would of course involve significant up-front costs, which would need to be justified by the scale of subsequent benefits. Secondly, we would need to be confident that any option contributes sustainably to development and poverty reduction. For loan instruments that includes ensuring that they do not contribute to unsustainable debt burdens. Thirdly, we would need to ensure that any option is affordable, considering its impact on UK Government finances. Lending options will require provision of a significant non-ODA budget, as well as ODA, which presents a particular challenge. Fourthly, we would need to ensure that any option contributes to the wider UK national interest, in line with the Government’s aid strategy.

My hon. Friend has made an important, timely and very well-informed contribution, and I assure him that his advocacy will be taken fully into account as we explore these options further.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

1. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the cost-effectiveness of funding for the National Citizen Service programme.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The National Citizen Service is a life-changing experience. The programme delivers good value for money for the taxpayer, and the most recent evaluation showed that the summer programme generated over £2 in benefits for every £1 spent.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Does he think that the high pay of its senior administrators is in line with the spirit of the NCS?

Matt Hancock: I think the outcomes from the NCS are very powerful. It brings communities together and it is one of the most effective things that we have in making sure that people come together at a young age and understand our national life as a whole. Of course we are always seeking to improve its administration; the hon. Gentleman would expect nothing less.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the museums sector.

Mr Seely: Will the Minister do all he can to support my campaign to encourage national cultural institutions to engage with the Island, for education and regeneration purposes? Does he agree that the Island, with its unique relationship with the arts and sciences over the centuries, should be a perfect partner for many of those institutions?

Michael Ellis: I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the benefits of the Isle of Wight. I visited it last year, and Osborne House is just one of its many attractions. Arts Council England South West has identified the cultural development of the Isle of Wight as one of its key activities for 2018 to 2020, and we support that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Happy midsummer’s day to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone else.

It is wonderful that we have free museums, but is it not a fact that not enough kids from lower income families go to them? Is it not time we did something about that? The school holidays are nearly here, and most of the things that kids want to go to in London are very expensive.

Michael Ellis: Of course, it continues to be our policy that museums are free to enter. People of all backgrounds and communities get the opportunity to engage. In fact, engagement is very strong among the most disadvantaged groups.
holiday period. We always want to do more to increase access to museums, and that is a constant focus for me and my Department.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What are the Government doing to help the Glasgow School of Art, following its terrible fire?

Michael Ellis: I was struck by the awful tragedy of the fire at the Glasgow School of Art, and my heart goes out to everyone affected. It is my intention to visit it as soon as that can be arranged, and we are in constant discussions on the subject of how and if we can help.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on industrial heritage. I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss our recent report. Does he agree that our museums need to give greater attention to the Royal Ordnance munitions factories in world war two, where so many women, including my grandmother, worked and made such a contribution to the war effort?

Michael Ellis: I enjoyed my meeting with the hon. Gentleman. Yes, indeed: there is a great deal to be gained by visits to ordnance museums and many other areas where women played an integral and key part during both world wars, and before and since.

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s meeting with the hon. Gentleman must have been a culturally up-market affair indeed.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware, as will the Minister, of the tragic fire at the Glasgow School of Art and the Mackintosh Museum. We are extremely grateful for the comments that have been put on the record. Will the Secretary of State give his personal commitment to look at a fund for local traders and community members affected? Will he also join me in welcoming Glasgow’s bid to host the new Channel 4 headquarters and agree that the presence of Channel 4 in Glasgow, with its wealth of talent and creativity, would send a strong message that the channel is indeed for everyone in the UK?

Mr Speaker: It is not a museum, but there is a bit of latitude, I suppose.

Michael Ellis: The issue of where Channel 4 goes is of interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on industrial heritage. I was struck by the awful tragedy of the fire at the Glasgow School of Art, and my heart goes out to everyone affected. It is my intention to visit it as soon as that can be arranged, and we are in constant discussions on the subject of how and if we can help.

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Mr Speaker: It is not a museum, but there is a bit of latitude, I suppose.

Michael Ellis: The issue of where Channel 4 goes is of course a matter for it. Glasgow’s iconic landmark is well recognised. I know about Mackintosh’s work because there is a Mackintosh property in Northampton that is highly regarded. We will be looking at this. All options are open with regard to the hon. Lady’s point.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Rosindell. [ Interruption. ] Oh, what a shame—we were going to hear about more international sport being played in the UK. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is well, but I am afraid he is not here and we must move on.

Football Grounds: Safe Standing Areas

4. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of introducing safe standing areas at football grounds in the English premier league and championship.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Over 1 million people watch football every week. We are grateful for the engagement of fans from across the country in expressing their views on safe standing, including 541 of the hon. Gentleman’s own constituents who signed the recent petition. We are looking into any changes that may be needed, and we are in discussions with the football authorities and relevant stakeholders to ensure that we carefully review the evidence on this matter.

Jeff Smith: The truth is that we already have standing at practically every football ground in the country—it is just that it is on terraces designed for seats rather than standing, so it is less safe. The majority of clubs, and the leagues, are now calling for safe standing. So will the Minister let the clubs work with the safety advisory groups to design a system that works for them?

Tracey Crouch: It is only in the top two tiers of football that an all-seated stadium policy exists; the other tiers are allowed to have standing. However, we are working very closely with all the football authorities to look at this issue.

Liz McInnes: My local football club, Rochdale AFC, plays at Spotland stadium, which is also home to Rochdale Hornets rugby league club. If Rochdale AFC were promoted from league 1 to the championship, it would have to get rid of its standing area, to the detriment of the rugby league fans. Can the Minister explain why it is safe to stand watching rugby but not safe to stand watching football?

Tracey Crouch: There are variations in a number of policy matters between different sports, and standing is just one of them. Of course, I wish Rochdale well in its promotion attempts next season. It did not do so well last season, as I know from many of the lobby fans of Rochdale. We are looking at all the various issues. We are working very closely with fan groups and the football authorities to carefully review this.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I heartily recommend that the Minister meet Ian Bankier and the board of Celtic football club, which has successfully piloted a safe standing area? If Ministers cannot take up the offer that Celtic has made for any of them to attend an upcoming home game, might they meet Ian Bankier here, where they can hear at first hand about the success that this pilot scheme has been?

Tracey Crouch: I recently had the pleasure of meeting a member of the Celtic board, albeit by accident, in Westminster. I can assure my hon. Friend that members of the Sports Ground Safety Authority and my officials have already spoken to Celtic.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Only a few weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) held a meeting in the House with over 30 football supporters’ clubs, all of which unanimously called for the Government to listen to fans and introduce safe standing. Will the Government finally listen?
Tracey Crouch: As I have made clear in almost every answer I have given, we work very closely with bodies such as the Football Supporters' Federation and Supporters Direct. We are listening to the football authorities and we are looking at this issue more carefully. There are a number of complexities around safe standing, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates. This will be debated in more detail on Monday.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments and hope that she intends to fully involve supporters' groups such as Scunthorpe United's Iron Trust in her deliberations.

Tracey Crouch: I am always happy to listen to the Iron Trust.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the England team on their fantastic win in the World Cup this week.

I have met safety authorities, supporters' groups, clubs and leagues, and they all have one thing in common: over the last three months, they have not heard from Government Ministers, which is why they are bemused at the rushed review announced more than two weeks ago. The Government need to stop taking football fans for granted and start listening. The Minister has an open goal. Will she make football safer by introducing safe standing? Is she going to listen?

Tracey Crouch: I have already said that I am listening to a number of people in football from across the board, including the authorities. We are looking at all the data and evidence and will make a decision in due course.

Problem Gambling

5. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce problem gambling.

11. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce problem gambling.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We take problem gambling very seriously and have taken decisive action on fixed odds betting terminals. We are determined to tackle that social blight and have decided to cut the maximum stake to £2.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Secretary of State for his response and for what he has done in this area. Does he agree that online gambling is in many ways more dangerous than gambling in bookies? What steps will he take to tackle that danger?

Matt Hancock: In our response to the consultation, we set out significant further steps to strengthen the safeguards for online gambling. The Gambling Commission already has a whole series of requirements in that area. There is more to do, and we are getting on with it.

Michelle Donelan: As the Secretary of State knows, I am strongly supportive of the decision taken on FOBTs, but problem gambling is an issue in my constituency, especially among the vulnerable. What more can the Department do to push gambling companies to better support addicts?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support and for that of many Members across the House for the action we are taking on problem gambling. Clearly it is important to ensure that we tackle online issues as well. That is complicated by the nature of the technology, but the Gambling Commission is working hard to ensure that the right protections are in place.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I once again congratulate the Secretary of State on introducing the £2 maximum stake for FOBTs. Will he use his considerable persuasive powers to talk to his colleagues at the Treasury and get that implemented by April 2019, and not a day later?

Matt Hancock: Of course, this needs to go through Parliament, and there is a process that needs to be followed. In order to cover any negative impact on the public finances, the change needs to be linked to an increase in remote gaming duty, paid for by online gaming operators at the relevant Budget. There are steps that need to be taken, but the hon. Gentleman knows just how enthusiastic I am to get this in place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While I welcome the lowering of the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals, has the Secretary of State considered a reduction in the number of betting advertisements shown during football matches, which are watched by a massive number of impressive young men and women?

Matt Hancock: That issue has been raised, and we have looked at it. Working with the Gambling Commission, we want to ensure that we get the rules in this space right.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When is the Secretary of State going to ban 16-year-olds from playing the national lottery and buying scratchcards on the national lottery, or is he more worried about who is winning the money than who is losing the money?

Matt Hancock: We put that issue into the review, and I am sure that my hon. Friend's consideration will be taken into account, along with others.

Sports-related Tourism

6. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote sports-related tourism in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The Government have secured hosting rights, I am pleased to say, for a number of major sporting events. That includes the cricket world cup next year, Euro 2020 matches and the Birmingham Commonwealth games in 2022. We will use national and local tourism agencies to ensure that we take advantage of all opportunities.

Mark Pawsey: Rugby, the birthplace of the game, is proud that its visitor attraction, the World Rugby Hall of Fame, not only hosts an annual ceremony to induct the greats of the game but is a popular attraction for visitors from both home and rugby-playing nations
around the world, with 18,000 visitors already. How is the Minister's tourism strategy supporting such attractions? Will he accept an invitation to visit the World Rugby Hall of Fame?

Michael Ellis: I would be delighted to do so. My hon. Friend is quite right to draw the House's attention to the World Rugby Hall of Fame, which is one of the many excellent attractions in the United Kingdom. There was William Webb Ellis, of course—no relation, which may surprise you, Mr Speaker. The Government are committed to boosting UK tourism, particularly outside London, and the Discover England fund does that. I would be very happy to visit or to meet my hon. Friend at any time.

Michael Ellis: 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), and I do care a great deal about this, as does the Secretary of State. The reality is that we want to get as many events as possible outside London and across the country. We are always looking to do that, and we continue to do so.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Mr Speaker, if you were to attend the Astwood Bank carnival on 15 July, you would see the sport of Viking fighting and horseman stunts being contested on the field. This brings in 5,000 people from all over Worcestershire. Does the Minister agree with me that these local events are very important for our communities? Will he congratulate the organisers, and what more will he do to ensure their success?

Michael Ellis: I certainly congratulate the organisers of that event, and of course those of the many other events that take place around the country. I cannot accept every request to take part in all these events; nevertheless, I will do my very best.

Mr Speaker: It sounds like a most magnificent event, but I should gently point out to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) that it is the men's singles final at Wimbledon that day.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My constituency is famous for its sport and for its sporting venues. We would love more sports tourism, but the failure of the Government to invest in the redevelopment of our railway station, the dreadful service on the Great Western Railway main line from London and the refusal to devolve air passenger duty are preventing an increase in sports tourism. What is the Minister going to do to persuade his Cabinet colleagues to sort this out?

Michael Ellis: Actually, huge investment—an unprecedented amount—has gone into the railways. Our tourism figures are up—they are up vastly on previous years—and they continue to rise, so I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady’s question. We work very hard to encourage as much tourism as possible, including sports tourism.

Music Venues

7. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support live music venues.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The live music industry is a vital part of the UK’s economy, contributing £1 billion annually. We have announced that the agent of change principle will now be included in the national planning policy framework, helping to protect music venues when new housing is built. We will continue working across Government, and with the industry and the Musicians Union, on a range of measures to support the live music industry.

Dr Huq: From Arcade Fire at Wembley to Lovebox at Gunnersbury Park, big gigs in west London are booming, but small venues are on the brink of extinction. The Spinning Wheel in Ealing is now a Sainsbury's and The Castle in Acton is earmarked to become student housing. What are the Government doing to protect our pubs from rocketing business rates, greedy developers and, now, the shortage of CO₂ that is threatening to take the fizz out of beer for fans?

Margot James: The hon. Lady mentions business rates. A £300 million rate relief fund is available to councils to provide flexible support to businesses, including music venues, which I accept cannot hike prices in order to protect themselves. I would draw her attention to successful small venues, such as Base Studios in Stourbridge, which has adopted a very entrepreneurial route and is thriving.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): As thousands of fans pour into Wales this weekend for the Ed Sheeran concerts, what would my hon. Friend say to a disabled constituent of mine who was left incredibly distressed after paying more than £450 more for her tickets, owing to the so-called drip pricing tactic that Viagogo continues to use? I really thought that the Government were making progress on this. Why are people still being ripped off?

Margot James: I assure my right hon. Friend that the Government are making progress. We have reformed the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to give more protection to consumers when they are purchasing from secondary ticketing sites. We have also brought in the bots legislation so that it is now illegal to use electronic means to secure more tickets that the number the original organisers stated as a maximum.
Margot James: I am a great admirer of the Ricoh stadium, although I am not sure it would qualify as a small music venue. Coventry benefits, of course, from being the city of culture in 2022, and I am sure that that will galvanise a huge amount of effort in support of what the hon. Gentleman requires.

Artificial Intelligence

8. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the artificial intelligence sector throughout the UK.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK has a world-class ecosystem for AI, and the Government are determined to maintain our position at the forefront of those technologies. That is why we published a sector deal in April, bringing together Government, industry and academia to provide almost £1 billion of investment to support growth in that sector.

Alan Mak: The growing use of AI and big data can help Britain to lead the fourth industrial revolution. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the benefits of those technologies are felt by people, communities and businesses across the entire country?

Margot James: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all his work in this area. We have a full agenda following the publication of the sector deal, which will ensure that the benefits of AI are affected across the country. Tech Nation now has an AI programme that will support ecosystems across the country.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): If we are to be a world leader in AI, we will need more computer scientists. This week, Roehampton University reported on the total collapse in the number of students studying ICT at GSCE level. Will the Minister set out her target for the number of students studying technology over the next year, and say what she will do to ensure that more girls in particular study ICT, because that is where the collapse is worst?

Margot James: I very much share the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns. We must encourage girls to study science, technology, engineering and maths, not just computer science, and programmes have been designed to do just that. We have made progress by making computer science mandatory in schools, which is a good first step. I am sure we will build on that, and recover the lost students at GSCE level to which the right hon. Gentleman rightly refers.

Public Libraries

9. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public libraries.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): Libraries support people, communities and society as a whole, by providing access to books and literature and, increasingly, to modern technology.

Peter Aldous: With today being Suffolk Day, it is appropriate to highlight the great work of Suffolk Libraries, which is a successful, industrial and provident society that provides a growing range of community services. Will the Secretary of State—a fellow Suffolk MP—work with it as it seeks to become more innovative, self-sufficient and resilient?

Matt Hancock: I commend Suffolk Libraries, which is a thriving public service mutual that, as my hon. Friend says, does a great job. Today could not be a better day to celebrate what Suffolk Libraries does, because Suffolk Day, on midsummer’s day, celebrates everything that is brilliant about the county that is beautiful and full of wonderful people and great food. It is a great place to visit, a great place to live, a great place to be, and a wonderful place to represent.

Rural Broadband and Mobile Coverage

10. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We are clear on the continued need to improve broadband and mobile connectivity in rural areas. Broadband UK’s superfast programme has achieved 95% coverage, and continues to connect more rural premises. The broadband universal service obligation, implemented by 2020, will ensure that rural areas are not left behind.

Jeremy Quin: How is the Minister ensuring that new housing developments are fully equipped with broadband during the construction phase?

Margot James: We have an agreement with the Home Builders Federation that all new developments by members of that organisation will deliver full broadband to the premises as those developments progress. I regularly meet a barrier-busting taskforce to consider how we can build on that voluntary agreement—not all builders are members of the federation—so that all residents of new-build developments receive the full-fibre premises to which they should be entitled.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I urge the Minister, when she is looking at mobile phone signals for rural communities, not to forget the south Wales valleys? The three and a half valleys that I represent, the Ogmore, Garw, Llynfi and Gilfach valleys, have massive problems with mobile phones signals, so please can she make sure she does not forget them?

Margot James: The valleys in south Wales, like the great rural areas of Scotland, present challenges, but challenges that will be overcome. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they are an absolute priority.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Minister look at the productivity lag that the broadband and mobile notspots cause in our constituencies? Will the Department assess what could be achieved if we had greater broadband and mobile coverage in those areas?
Margot James: I certainly will look at the issues my hon. Friend raises. I am very aware of these notspots. We are working constantly with Broadband UK and mobile operators to close them in the shortest possible time.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Ofcom’s figures show that 4G rollout across the whole of the UK is now at 52%, up from 38%. In Scotland, however, that figure is only 29%, up from 15%. When can we expect Scotland’s coverage to catch up with that in the rest of the country?

Margot James: If we take coverage from at least one provider, we see that 50% of Scotland now has mobile coverage. I accept that that is obviously not enough, but that does provide coverage for indoor voice for at least 90% of Scottish premises. However, we still need to have a great deal more to do.

Hockey

12. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps is the sports Minister taking to support hockey in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Hockey is a fantastic sport and I am pleased that Sport England is continuing to invest in the good work that England Hockey is doing to promote the game at the grassroots across the country. We all know that the hockey women’s world cup is taking place in London this summer. Given that the England matches are already sold out, I am sure it is going to be absolutely brilliant and inspire future generations.

Mr Hollobone: Will the sports Minister join me in congratulating Kettering hockey club and all involved at the club on the wonderful achievement of being named by England Hockey as its sports club of the year 2018?

Tracey Crouch: I will indeed congratulate Kettering hockey club on its award. It is an absolutely fantastic achievement. We need to remember that, quite often, hockey clubs and lots of other sporting clubs are run by dedicated volunteers who go on to inspire lots of people to get involved.

Wakefield: Ministerial Visit

15. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What plans has the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis) to visit Wakefield in the next 12 months.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Wakefield has a flourishing cultural sector, which is reflected in the high-profile work of local heritage arts and museum attractions, such as the Hepworth and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. My predecessor, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), visited Wakefield in December 2017, some six months ago.

Mary Creagh: That is very good news, but may I encourage the Minister and his colleagues to make either a ministerial visit or a family visit to the Coal Mining museum, which celebrates its 30th birthday this year; the Hepworth, which is launching its new surrealist exhibition by Lee Miller this evening—I will be hot-footing my way up there after these questions; or to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where Her Royal Highness Princess Anne has just launched “The Coffin Jump” by Katrina Palmer, which celebrates the heroism of the women volunteers of the first aid nursing yeomanry in world war one?

Michael Ellis: What a walking, living advertisement the hon. Lady is for her constituency and her area. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visited it with his family recently.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): That’s because there is nothing to see in Suffolk!

Michael Ellis: I did not hear that! We certainly value Wakefield and everything it has to offer. We will certainly keep it in mind for future visits.

Mr Speaker: We are now fully informed about the Wakefield situation and we are immensely grateful to the hon. Lady.

Topical Questions

T1. [905980]Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is the Department for all the things that make life worth living. This week, one moment that really made life worth living was Harry Kane’s 91st minute winner against Tunisia. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the England team the best of luck on Sunday and beyond. In the past week, we have seen three records set in cricket, with Scotland beating England and the women’s and men’s England cricket teams both setting world records. We send our admiration and congratulations to them all.

Mr Sheerman: I obviously support the Secretary of State in what he says about the English teams, especially the women’s cricket team, which was brilliant. Could I ask him to consider carefully our big towns, such as Huddersfield, which are not cities? Up to now, it has never had a consensus on becoming a city. Big towns such as Huddersfield really suffer from not receiving much money, which goes to cities. Is there some fund, or some way, in which the big towns could get their fair share of resources?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Representing four towns myself, I entirely understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from. We try to ensure that the funds that we supply through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are available right across the country, whether that means vouchers for broadband, or the cultural development fund to improve the cultural life of an area. Huddersfield, like many other towns, is very welcome to apply for them all.
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Although we welcome the Gigabit voucher scheme, which was introduced by my right hon. Friend, may I ask him what steps he has taken to explore alternative methods of broadband delivery, such as TV white space, as in the project that is currently being trialled in Kinross-shire in my constituency?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We will certainly review the white space option. Fixed wireless solutions are already widely available in those hard-to-reach areas, but the universal service obligation will deliver high-speed broadband connectivity through wired or wireless technologies.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): One in five children in their last year of primary school are obese. What plans does the Secretary of State have to restrict further junk food advertising on television?

Matt Hancock: We are working with all stakeholders—the Department of Health and Social Care as well as the public service broadcasters—to take this question forward. Of course, it is not just a matter of advertising. To tackle obesity in this nation, we need a full spectrum approach that looks at all matters. Possibly some of the most important measures are those that encourage reformulation so that everybody benefits from eating healthier food.

Tom Watson: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but as a former Digital Minister, he will know that children now spend more of their time online than watching TV. If he does not create a level playing field on advertising, will revenues not just flood from TV to Channel 4? What is the Minister going to do about online junk food advertising?

Matt Hancock: As I said in my previous response, we need a full spectrum response. It is akin to the debate we had earlier about gambling advertising. This is not just a matter of TV. Increasingly, people are watching things through all the technologies available. We have to make sure that the response is appropriate to that.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): There is enormous potential in 5G mobile technology, especially to enable the delivery of our industrial strategy to the whole UK, so what will the Secretary of State do to ensure that our great towns keep pace with our cities?

Margot James: The Government want all of the UK to benefit from 5G, and the future telecoms infrastructure review will create the right policy and regulatory environment to support this aim. After these questions, I will be visiting one of the 5G test bed pilots that is already up and running in Guildford, so I can assure my hon. Friend that across the whole UK, towns as well as cities will benefit from our commitment to 5G.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Yesterday, the European Parliament’s Legal Affairs Committee approved a draft of the proposed directive on copyright in the digital single market. Does the Minister agree that we cannot miss the significant opportunity to address the transfer value experienced by the music industry, and will he assure the House that the Government remain committed to closing the value gap and ensuring that our great British creators, and those who invest in them, are properly rewarded for the use of their work?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Property rights are the foundation of a market economy and intellectual property rights are the 21st-century version of that. The copyright directive is a good directive. We have to get the details right in its implementation, but it is a good step forward and I look forward to it becoming law.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is great to hear so many references to cricket this morning. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and the Secretary of State are well aware that the cricket world cup will come to England next year. It will include games between New Zealand and Afghanistan and between Australia and Pakistan, at the glorious county ground in Somerset—in Taunton, indeed. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that the event will attract the maximum number of international visitors, as well as home visitors, including, perhaps, the Secretary of State himself?

Matt Hancock: It is almost as if my hon. Friend had some connection with Taunton. [Laughter.] She certainly speaks well for it.

We are absolutely determined that when the cricket world cup comes to this nation next year we will gain the full benefit, including all the business people who will come here. I went to India with the world cup trophy itself to encourage Indian tour operators to send as many people as possible from that fine nation to this country, and that includes Taunton.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In their election manifesto, the Tories promised: “Our Universal Service Obligation will ensure that by 2020 every home and business in Britain has access to high speed broadband.”

No ifs, no buts. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that is still the Government’s position, and that every home and business will be connected by 2020?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. We passed legislation to introduce the universal service obligation to ensure that everyone could have access to decent broadband by 2020. It has been harder in Scotland—we have been waiting five years for the Scottish National party Government to spend the £20 million that we promised them—but now we are just getting on with it and delivering directly to the people of Scotland.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking David Dimbleby for the role that he played for 25 years at the helm of “Question Time”, and does he agree that, in a year that marks 100 years of women’s suffrage, the baton should be passed to a woman?

Matt Hancock: I think the whole House will want to congratulate David Dimbleby on his achievement as he steps down. While of course the job must be awarded on merit, I do think it is about time there was a woman at the helm of “Question Time”.

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THAT they can make the very best of their future careers?

Matt Hancock: There is no greater enthusiast for digital technology than me, and I warmly welcome the pupils and staff from Wick high school. Of course, technology must be used appropriately in schools. There are many incredibly bright schoolchildren in the Visitors’ Gallery, and I hope that they can make the most of all the digital technologies that are available.

Mr Speaker: Well done Wick, I think we should say. Splendid.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Cornish pilot gig rowing is one of the fastest-growing participation sports in the country, but it struggles to gain the recognition that it needs because it is registered under British rowing, which is a very different type of sport. Will the sports Minister meet me to discuss how we can secure better recognition for pilot gig rowing and support this excellent participation sport?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): You will be shocked to learn, Mr Speaker, that I did in fact do some gig rowing last year, when I was in Mousehole in Cornwall. I should be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can promote it further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Great Exhibition of the North, a summer-long celebration of the culture and science of the north, will open tomorrow evening in Gateshead, overlooking Newcastle. Does the Secretary of State agree that culture, science and engineering are essential parts of a vibrant economy, and will he tell us how that legacy will be ensured?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Lady has mentioned the Great Exhibition of the North, which will be launched tomorrow in Newcastle and Gateshead. I shall be going straight up there after questions, and the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), will be going tomorrow. It will be a brilliant celebration of everything that the north of England has delivered to the nation in the past and will deliver in the future, and the hon. Lady is a great example of that.

Mr Speaker: On the subject of the north of England, let us hear from north Yorkshire. Mr Kevin Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My report “Solutions for the fifteen per cent”, which I have sent to the Secretary of State, makes a compelling case for the use of fixed wireless to deliver broadband to the hardest-to-reach areas. Will the Secretary of State meet me and colleagues to discuss how those initiatives might be implemented?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is also a great example of the future of the north of England, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss these new technologies that are coming on stream that will help improve connectivity in Yorkshire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In Bristol, Bristol Plays Music and the Music Trust are developing a cultural curriculum with Bristol Old Vic and various other arts organisations. Will the Secretary of State or the Culture Minister, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), visit Bristol when this curriculum is implemented, and will the Culture Minister support it being used in other schools across the country?

Margot James: I look forward to hearing more about that excellent venture. I recently met the hon. Lady at an excellent meeting with the Musicians’ Union, and I admire her passion and share it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will be able to call all remaining questioners if they confine themselves to a short sentence each.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): John Rowbotham and his staff at the Stirling Observer play a crucial role in the life of the communities I serve. What is being done to support local newspapers?

Matt Hancock: The first thing we have done is fought off attempts to put more costs on to local newspapers, and now we have the Cairncross review, which I hope my hon. Friend will engage with, which is looking at how we can make them sustainable for the long term.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Two fires in the last three months have destroyed three listed buildings in Glasgow, and over 100 listed buildings in Glasgow are at risk, so will the Minister engage with the Treasury and ensure they restore VAT relief on the renovations of listed buildings in this country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Of course tax is a matter for the Treasury, but we are always looking at ways to protect and conserve our historic and heritage buildings; they are crucially important to all of us and we will always look to do that.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Redditch is only about 20 miles away from Coventry which is due to be the city of culture. What are the Government doing to ensure that Redditch also benefits from this fantastic event?

Michael Ellis: The UK city of culture, Coventry 2021, is going to be a fantastic thing for Coventry and also for its environs, including my hon. Friend’s area, and we know from Hull, and we will see in Coventry, the tremendous effects of the UK city of culture.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Fewer than 2% of people who have a problem with gambling receive help, yet this industry is worth £13.8 billion and only £10 million of it went into helping them. Is it not time for a levy?
Tracey Crouch: We already have a levy, but it is a voluntary levy, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman saw that earlier this week the Secretary of State visited the NHS gambling addiction centre and has pledged to work very closely with Public Health England to ensure we continue to fund help for those with gambling addictions.

**ATTORNEY GENERAL**

*The Attorney General was asked—*

**Forced Marriages**

1. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for forced marriages. [905990]

2. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for forced marriages. [905991]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** The Crown Prosecution Service takes forced marriage very seriously and the prosecution of these crimes remains a priority. In May of this year the CPS secured the first two convictions under the specific offence of forced marriage in England. These successful prosecutions send a clear message that forced marriage is unacceptable and that those responsible will be prosecuted.

Philip Davies: We all know that women are much more likely to be the victims of forced marriage than men, but the Daily Mail reported yesterday that police in south Yorkshire had made history by issuing the first ever order to protect a male victim of forced marriage. What is the Solicitor General doing to ensure that the CPS is also aware of male victims of forced marriage?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and I am happy to tell him that the legal guidance and protocol used by the CPS have been updated to include the experiences of male victims, to help challenge myths and stereotypes and provide details of any support services for them. Indeed, a section on male victims was included in the forced marriage training session held in December of last year, which is now being spread locally throughout CPS areas by forced marriage leads.

Rebecca Pow: Why is the CPS finding it so tough to secure female genital mutilation prosecutions?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend is right to acknowledge the challenge facing prosecutors because these prosecutions are among the most complex referred to the CPS. They involve victims being hurt and coerced by members of their own families and communities, and therefore victims coming forward is a confidence issue. But the joint CPS and police forced marriage focus group is working hard to address the challenges faced when prosecuting these crimes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): University of Nottingham research shows that victims of forced marriage quite often have learning difficulties. What special steps are the Government taking to support those very vulnerable victims?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Lady is right to acknowledge that among the complexities and the questions of confidence is the exploitation of a vulnerability or a particular disability, and that is very much part of the process that I outlined in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). However, the intervention of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is helpful, and I will ensure that that focus is re-emphasised by the CPS.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General outline what support is given to the victims of attempted forced marriage to provide them with a new life and a fresh start? Is the CPS equipped to signpost victims to such funding, rather than just moving on after the prosecution?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the aftermath of a prosecution, and work is ongoing between the CPS and the police not just to signpost victims to such funding, rather than just moving on after their horrific experiences.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Two prosecutions does not sound like much. What is the Solicitor General's estimate of the number of forced marriages in the UK each year?

**The Solicitor General:** With respect, it is difficult for me to estimate. Being realistic, prosecutions are not reflecting the number of forced marriages that exist, but we saw an increase in convictions between 2011-12 and last year from 23 to 32. We also now have over 1,500 forced marriage protection orders, which are designed to prevent the crime from taking place at all.

**Public Legal Education**

3. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What recent steps the Law Officers have taken to promote public legal education. [905992]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** I have launched a new public legal education panel formed of leading organisations that promote the importance of teaching people about the law and their basic civil and criminal rights. As part of that, I am able to work closely with those involved in PLE, supporting initiatives to increase its profile and to reach more members of the public.

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Solicitor General for that answer, but what more can be done to inspire young people in Willenhall, Bloxwich and Walsall North to pursue a career in the legal profession?

**The Solicitor General:** I commend my hon. Friend for his interest in this subject and his passion for spreading opportunity in his constituency. My advice to him and to legal practitioners in the Walsall and Bloxwich area is that they should get into and work with our schools and take part in “lawyers in schools” sessions, which not only help to deliver PLE, but inspire young people into a future legal career.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I agree with the Solicitor General that public legal education is important, so how would he explain to the public what has gone wrong with prosecution disclosure? Who is responsible?
I appreciate that action is being taken, is it not time that there were failures to manage ongoing disclosure. Although that police scheduling was "routinely poor" and that the HM inspectorate of constabulary found the "Making it Fair" report by the CPS inspectorate were warnings about disclosure two years ago. In July 2017, about being ahead of the curve but, of course, there is justice system, but failures in disclosure clearly undermine education is important for confidence in our criminal justice system, but failures in disclosure clearly undermine confidence. Of the 3,637 cases that have been reviewed, disclosure concerns have been found in 47. That is an extremely complex and sensitive case. The CPS is looking at the matter, and the Attorney General and I are the Ministers who answer for that independent organisation. The CPS is taking the time to investigate the case fully, and then the Home Office will respond.

The Solicitor General: Once again, I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for raising an interesting point. She will know that the Attorney General and I launched a review late last year ahead of some of the latest stories that have hit the headlines about the importance of disclosure. It has been a long-term issue, involving both the CPS and, notably, the police, but we are working closely to update and revise the guidelines to tackle the issues with which she and I are very familiar.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Scotland, public legal education begins at school, because human rights are part of the curriculum for excellence, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights recently heard evidence that this is part of the reason for Scotland's more positive public discourse about human rights. Has the Solicitor General had any discussions with his counterparts in the Department for Education about emulating Scotland's education example south of the border?

The Solicitor General: Once again, I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for raising an interesting dimension. I have not had those conversations, but I certainly want to. The curriculum in England and Wales—England in particular—already includes citizenship, of which PLE can be a part, but I will take on board her observations. I am grateful.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Public legal education is important for confidence in our criminal justice system, but failures in disclosure clearly undermine that confidence. Of the 3,637 cases that have been reviewed, disclosure concerns have been found in 47. How confident is the Solicitor General that there are not disclosure concerns in tens of further cases?

The Solicitor General: With respect, work has already exposed several deficiencies, but it would be an idle claim for me to suggest that that would be the sum total of it, because we are looking at a particular type of offence. My Department and the Attorney General's Office have been ahead of the curve on this, and it has been our priority for some time to tackle what I and the Attorney General understand from our days at the criminal Bar as a long-term issue.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Solicitor General talks about being ahead of the curve but, of course, there were warnings about disclosure two years ago. In July 2017, the "Making it Fair" report by the CPS inspectorate and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary found that police scheduling was "routinely poor" and that there were failures to manage ongoing disclosure. Although I appreciate that action is being taken, is it not time that action was absolutely urgent?

The Solicitor General: We do appreciate the urgency, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for referring to that important inspectorate report. I remind him that the Attorney General and I asked the inspectors to undertake that work, which has allowed a clear evidential basis for action to be taken now. It is urgent and we are getting on with it.

Child Sexual Exploitation

4. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for child sexual exploitation.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady makes a pertinent point. She will know that the Attorney General and I launched a review late last year ahead of some of the latest stories that have hit the headlines about the importance of disclosure. It has been a long-term issue, involving both the CPS and, notably, the police, but we are working closely to update and revise the guidelines to tackle the issues with which she and I are very familiar.

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The Attorney General: I can confirm that, and my hon. Friend and the House will know that, where it is possible and appropriate to attribute these cyber-attacks to nation states, that is exactly what we do. He and others will recall the attack on, among others, a number of NHS institutions, which we were able to attribute to the North Koreans. We have done so again in relation to the Russians, and that is entirely right because nation states should be held to account for what they do.

Helen Whately: The World Economic Forum has listed cyber-attacks as the third greatest threat to global stability. Given that there are no borders in cyber-space, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we need to work to build international consensus on how international law is applied to cyber-space?

The Attorney General: Yes, I do agree. We should recognise the progress that has been made, difficult though it is. In 2015, 20 nation states agreed that the provisions of the UN charter should apply in cyber-space. Included among those 20 nation states were Russia and China, so we have been able to make some progress. In the end, every nation state takes responsibility for its own actions, and it is right that the UK gives leadership where it can.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It has been accepted by the NATO Secretary-General that cyber-attacks can, of themselves, trigger the collective defence provisions within article 5. What is less clear is the nature and extent of such a cyber-attack that would cross that crucial threshold. Given the potential repercussions, do we not need clarity on this as a matter of urgency?

The Attorney General: We do, and my speech was intended to deliver at least some of that clarity. My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I believe it has now been established that the provisions of the UN charter that mean states are entitled to defend themselves from armed attack also apply in cyber-space. If a cyber-attack is essentially equivalent to an armed attack in its effects, it seems to me appropriate that it should be treated as such. This country is entitled to respond by cyber-means, or by other means that are necessary and proportionate.

Tackling Economic Crime

6. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What role the Serious Fraud Office has in tackling economic crime.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The SFO is a key player in the response to economic crime and continues to operate independently, investigating and prosecuting some of the most serious and complex economic crime. I was pleased to announce earlier this month my appointment of its next director, Lisa Osofsky, who will shortly join the SFO to lead the organisation in its vital task.

Craig Tracey: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Will he confirm that, despite the availability of deferred prosecution agreements, the SFO will still move directly to prosecute those involved in high-level economic crime, where it is appropriate to do so?

The Attorney General: Yes. Deferred prosecution agreements are a useful tool for the SFO, and they should be used where appropriate and where the corporate entity in question has co-operated fully with the investigation, but it remains the case that in the majority of the SFO’s case load it proceeds to prosecution where that is appropriate and the evidence suggests it is the way forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Attorney General knows that all of us want a really effective SFO, but we know that without the right resources it leans too heavily on big accountancy firms. There have been rumours recently of a link with a whistleblower that are interesting and very worrying indeed, so will he look into this?

The Attorney General: If the hon. Gentleman gives me details of the case he has in mind, of course I will look into it. He will know that the SFO receives its funding in core budget and in blockbuster funding to deal with those extra-large cases that need additional funding. There has never been an occasion, and I hope there never will be, when the SFO has not been able to proceed for reasons of resources—that should remain the case.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I was glad to hear the Attorney General confirm that the SFO will continue to operate independently. What specific measures have been put in place to ensure that the new tasking power given to the National Crime Agency in relation to economic crime does not compromise either operational independence or the independence of the decision making on whether or not to bring prosecutions?

The Attorney General: I can say three things to my hon. Friend on that. First, both the SFO and the NCA believe this power will hardly ever be used. Secondly, in order for it to be used both my consent and that of the Home Secretary are required. Thirdly, it seems to us that this is sensible co-ordination in the fight against economic crime, but it will not affect the opportunity that the SFO will continue to have to investigate and, of course, to prosecute its own cases. This affects only the opportunity to investigate; it does not affect making decisions on prosecution.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Attorney General may be aware of correspondence I have been having with the Solicitor General about my constituent Alun Richards. There is a growing campaign across the House in relation to banking fraud, specifically in relation to Lloyds, rather than just the Royal Bank of Scotland. The SFO will not investigate. I understand it is independent but may I urge the Attorney General to give the organisation more teeth, in order to ensure that our constituents can get the money back, having been able to get the proof to say it was taken?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As I suspect he knows by now from that correspondence, the issue here is primarily that the SFO
deals with a certain level of economic crime. It is not that economic crime that does not fall within that threshold level is not sensibly investigated and prosecuted by others. He will recognise that other agencies also investigate and prosecute economic crime, and we will want to make sure that they are properly resourced to do so. I hope that we will be able to find a satisfactory solution through those means.

Female Genital Mutilation

8. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for female genital mutilation.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): FGM is a crime and it is child abuse. The CPS has introduced a series of measures to improve the prosecution of these cases, including appointing a lead FGM prosecutor in each CPS area.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his reply. The French have had some success in arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning perpetrators of FGM. When are we going to bring justice for the British victims and have a serious deterrent for this abhorrent crime?

The Attorney General: I understand my hon. Friend’s point entirely, and he will understand the frustration felt in the CPS and elsewhere at the fact that those cases that have been brought to court have not resulted in conviction. He will recognise that every case is different and must be judged on its merits. As was said earlier, these cases are often difficult to prosecute. It is worth pointing out that we do not just respond to this behaviour by prosecution; there are also very important FGM prevention orders—civil orders that have criminal consequences if they are breached—and we have seen more than 200 of those since they were introduced in 2015.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Attorney General speaks of prevention; he may know that my constituent, Lola Ilesanmi, is still threatened with deportation, and her daughter has been threatened with FGM at the hands of Lola’s violent ex-partner if she returns to Nigeria. What is the Attorney General doing to work with the Home Secretary to prevent deportations, to prevent FGM and to prevent women and children from suffering from or being threatened by this abhorrent crime?

The Attorney General: I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot comment on the individual case that she raises and its immigration consequences, but I can tell her that it is open to courts that are persuaded to implement a civil prevention order to make travel requirements part of that order. There is that safeguard, but I am afraid I cannot give her a clear answer in respect of her constituency case, which I know she will raise with the Home Office.
Defence Fire and Rescue Project: Capita

10.35 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the awarding of the defence fire and rescue contract to Capita.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record the justification for the awarding of the contract. The defence fire and rescue project has been examining potential improvements in how fire and rescue services are provided to the Ministry of Defence, both here in the United Kingdom and overseas. The total value of defence fire and rescue operations is around £1.3 billion. We intend to award a 12-year contract worth around £400 million to Capita Business Services Ltd. However, this is open to possible challenges—the normal process ensues—following the issuing of the contract a ward decision notice and possible parliamentary challenges to the contingent liability.

The contract will deliver improvements in the safety of military and civilian firefighter personnel, and improvements in the equipment and training available to them. It will deliver savings that will be reinvested into the defence budget while sustaining our ability to support operations around the world and to support local authority fire services, should that be required at times of heightened national need. In doing so, it will ensure that our personnel, airfields and strategic assets worldwide continue to be protected from the risk of fire.

I assure Parliament that the proposed contractual arrangements have been subject to the fullest range of testing and scrutiny across Government to ensure that the services will be delivered in a sustainable and resilient manner. Safeguards are in place to ensure that there is no break in service provision. Capita is a strategic supplier to the Government, and the Cabinet Office maintains regular engagement with the company, as with all strategic suppliers.

Fire risk management will remain a defence responsibility after the award of the contract. In no circumstances will there be any compromise to our personnel’s safety. Over the course of the bidding for the contract, Capita’s financial status has been analysed by the MOD’s cost-assurance and analysis service, and we have in place the necessary contingency plans to ensure that the contract is managed accordingly. We will actively manage the contract to provide early warning of any performance concerns so that they can be addressed thoroughly.

Following a competitive bidding process, Capita’s bid was deemed to deliver the best technical solution and the best value for money for defence. Robust evaluation and modelling processes were undertaken to test the deliverability of the proposed contracts to ensure that all risks were identified. As well as the full assessment of the proposal, we have a contract that clearly defines the obligations for the contractor. A performance mechanism has been developed to make sure that Capita is incentivised to ensure that delivery targets are clearly defined.

I should be clear that this is not the first time that contractors have been used in this way—several sites, including Porton Down, are already using contractor fire service capability. In addition to offering significant financial savings that can be reinvested in defence, the project aims for the delivery of sustainable and agile defence fire and rescue services that meet the requirement without compromise.

Fabian Hamilton: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I was very eager to hear the Minister’s justification for awarding such a crucial contract for the defence fire and rescue service to Capita.

I think that we would all agree that it would be extremely worrying if a situation were to arise whereby this contract could not be delivered or was not delivered to the standard required. The risks, I am sure the Minister agrees, are simply too great for that to be allowed to happen.

The Minister’s Department received advice as recently as 7 June that Capita represents a 10-out-of-10 risk, so how was the decision made to give the contract to Capita? The Minister has already touched on that. His Department has said that all its suppliers are “subject to robust assessments ahead of any contract placement.”

What consideration, if any, was given to the advice that the Ministry of Defence has received on the financial health of the company?

We know that Capita has a record of poor performance for delivering Ministry of Defence contracts. It was stripped of the defence estate contract, and the less said about its Army recruitment contract the better. In spite of that, the Government have knowingly chosen to give Capita another contract. What specific measures has the Department put in place to monitor the delivery of the contract and to take penalty action for poor performance, if necessary?

The Government’s written statement told us that “the contract duration is 12 years”, which is a considerable amount of time for a company associated with extremely high risk. The fire service is vital to the safety of our armed forces, to their families and to key defence assets. Will the Minister tell us what arrangements will be in place if Capita is unable to deliver the contract for its full duration?

A number of defence fire workers will be very worried indeed about this news. The significance of the workforce, and their role in protecting MOD staff and families, and the Department’s infrastructure—both overseas and at home—cannot be overstated. What assurances can the Minister give us about the future of these workers and their pensions? What help will be provided for them if redundancies do occur?

Is it not time to accept that this Government’s ideologically driven approach to outsourcing public services at any cost has simply failed? We must end the racket of outsourcing and deliver solutions that benefit taxpayers and service users alike.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I appreciate his interest in, and concern about, these important matters. If I may, I will probably write to him in more detail, because he set out a series of questions, but I will give him an overview now to reassure him that the bidding process was absolutely robust.

I did go to some length in my opening remarks to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we were looking at a number of companies—Serco, Babcock and QinetiQ,
as well as an in-house offering—to ensure that we have a robust system that meets our responsibility to eliminate any problem related to fire. The actual bid process itself was competitive. There was robust evaluation modelling—it involved not just the MOD, but the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and indeed the three services—to make sure that we have the necessary processes in place to manage what will be an umbrella organisation.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the way in which our fire service is conducted means that we have responsibility inside the wire. There is also civil capability, and RAF and naval personnel are cap badged to provide fire capability, too. We also lean occasionally, when required, on local authorities, and that relationship will continue, but overall control will come from Capita itself. Having said that, the actual responsibility will be managed by the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation, which, as I have said, will continue to scrutinise the performance of Capita itself.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns about the workers themselves. Just under 600 civilian workers will be transferred across. I absolutely hope that this will not lead to any changes. If there are any, I hope that they will be done through redundancies. We are looking for investment in new machines, new technology, new capability and new safety measures, which will hopefully be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister said that personnel would be safer; will he explain how?

Mr Ellwood: Short and to the point, as ever. As I just mentioned, there will be investment in new technology—we need investment in new fire service vehicles—as well as training methods, collaboration and response times so that we can respond to any fire at any time. These changes will make the work of the fire service personnel safer.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Scottish National party Members have always been very concerned that these vital services were ever thought appropriate for privatisation. Our added concern is that the protection of national and defence strategic assets has been given to a company with such a chequered past. Indeed, on the day of the announcement, Capita’s chief executive was appearing before the Public Accounts Committee to answer questions about the company’s poor delivery of services to the NHS. Will the Minister therefore explain why the Government felt the need to privatise these services, when not even the US Department of Defence does, and how a company with such obvious shortcomings could be considered the best option for delivering this contract?

Mr Ellwood: I can only repeat what I said earlier: there was a robust bidding process and it was deemed that Capita offered the greatest contract we could have. Concerns have been raised about Capita in other areas—recruitment, for example, has been mentioned—but I am convinced that the necessary scrutiny is in place to provide the best deal and the necessary support for our fire service.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister say a bit more about the savings he talked about being reinvested in defence, which I am sure most of us in the House would be very glad to see?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that question, although it almost tempts me down a rabbit hole that I have occasionally gone down before. While I support the increase in the budget for the health service, I must reiterate that the UK’s defence posture is such that we must invest in our armed forces as well. Having said that, there is an obligation—a requirement; a duty—on the armed forces and the MOD to make efficiencies and savings, without affecting risk, and this is one area where we can do that and reinvest the savings in defence.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We have had 12 years of debate about what should happen to the contract—12 years of uncertainty for the workforce—and now we have a 12-year contract. It seems to me and the unions that key parts of the work currently delivered by the defence fire and rescue service, such as the checking of fire extinguishers on site, are not included in the contract. Capita does nothing for nothing, so this will not save money. What is the Minister doing to ensure this provides value for money?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady follows these issues very closely, and I pay tribute to her for her interest and expertise in this matter, which the House greatly appreciates. I agree that, for various reasons, this has taken too long. The contract process was run in accordance with the Defence and Security Public Contracts Regulations 2011, but it has taken too long for various reasons, some of which I have covered, including the number of stakeholders that had to scrutinise and agree the bidding process, and confirm the successful bidder. I take her point on board, however, and we will make sure as we do the evaluation that her concerns are met.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome the fact that safeguards are in place and that the delivery of the contract will be monitored. Will the Minister reconfirm that the contract represents value for money and will also result in improvements and savings to the Department?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is not just about savings; it is about the responsibilities of our defence fire service, which not only has the duty of looking after our airfields, ports, ships and bases, but has the responsibility of being on standby to help its civilian counterparts in extreme cases. It is important that we can invest in the necessary high-tech machinery and fire service capability. That is what will lead to savings in the long term.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Prospect, the union that represents staff in the MOD fire and rescue service, including in Devonport in my constituency, has said that any projected savings cannot be delivered without increasing the risk to defence. Will the Minister respond to that concern?

Mr Ellwood: I would need more detail even to respond to that very broad statement. The analysis done in the MOD, and the analysis that has been done by the Treasury and the Cabinet, says exactly the opposite. As
always, I am happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman’s concerns for Devonport; he did not mention Plymouth this time.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Can the Minister provide some assurances about fair terms towards subcontractors? BST Electrical in my constituency fell victim to the Carillion scandal because of Carillion’s obscene 120-day payment terms. Will the Minister assure me that that sort of invidious practice will not continue under Capita?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend’s question gives me licence to confirm that the shadow of Carillion hangs heavy over all Government Departments, if we are fair. Any new contract—with Capita or anyone else—needs to be sufficiently robust that we do not fall foul of some of the problems that Carillion experienced, including through its relationship with small and medium-sized enterprises, which my hon. Friend mentions.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There is a case for outsourcing when the company has specialist expertise. What specialist expertise does Capita have in military fire services? Does the Minister think that it is now time for freedom of information legislation to apply to companies that are, in effect, doing public sector work, so that we can know, for instance, what contingency plans there might be in case Capita goes belly up?

Mr Ellwood: May I welcome the fact that the right hon. Gentleman’s party—if he is speaking on its behalf—recognises the importance of the private sector in such cases? However, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) said, this should not apply at any cost or under any circumstances. A series of Governments—not just Conservative or coalition, but also Labour—have outsourced responsibility for firefighting from the armed forces over the past few decades, so it is very important that the necessary robust processes are in place to ensure that these contracts are met. We have around 60 contracts with Capita. Its responsibility is not to run the day-to-day things. Many people providing the fire service capability will continue on. This is about the management and organisation that Capita brings.

Mr Ellwood: Given Capita’s highest risk rating, will the Minister please give us a full list of the MOD’s Capita contracts?

Mr Ellwood: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with more information on that matter.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): A constituent of mine, Mr Rob Rigby, is the national secretary of the Unite branch representing these workers, and I can assure the Minister that the workers are not particularly happy about this announcement. If the contract is going to be such a success, why is the Minister excluding all the bases in Cyprus?

Mr Ellwood: I did not quite hear the end the hon. Gentleman’s question. I think it was to do with the agreement in Cyprus; is that correct?

Gareth Snell: I asked the Minister why he was excluding the bases in Cyprus.

Mr Ellwood: Particular terms and conditions will apply to our overseas bases, and there will be contracts in place. I think that nine airfields are already running under privatised contracts, so the question mark over a particular airfield may be subject to existing arrangements.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I try again with the Minister? I do not understand how a company that scores 10 out of 10 for risk in an internal document produced by the MOD can be awarded a contract.

Mr Ellwood: In the bid that was put forward, the expectation that is made here is for managing our fire risk capability, and it is in those circumstances that Capita is being judged. We do not step back and take a look at the numbers and the bits and pieces in other areas; it is particularly for this aspect of it. The concern that the hon. Lady raises must be taken into account by ensuring that there is robust scrutiny of the effectiveness of the contract as it ensues, and I will be happy to come back to the House to report on the success or otherwise of the contract with Capita. I give her that guarantee.
Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The workforce undertake a complicated pattern of working through their shift arrangements. Will the Minister guarantee that that will not fundamentally change? Many of the workforce travel long distances to work and are on site for days on end. Will he guarantee that that will continue?

Mr Ellwood: I hope that I speak on behalf of the whole House in paying tribute to the incredible bravery, commitment and determination of all our emergency services. There are specific harmony guidelines in place to ensure that they are able to meet their requirements, see their families and do their duties, and I am sure that they will be continued under this new contract.

Business of the House

10.56 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

Monday 25 June—Debate on a motion relating to a national policy statement on airports.

Tuesday 26 June—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Canada Trade Agreement) Order 2018 followed by motion to approve European documents relating to EU trade agreements: EU-Japan economic partnership agreement followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill followed by remaining stages of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill [Lords].

Wednesday 27 June—Second Reading of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

Thursday 28 June—Debate on a motion on improving air quality followed by debate on a motion on the role and effectiveness of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 29 June—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 July will include:

Monday 2 July—Estimates day (day 1). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Tuesday 3 July—Estimates day (day 2). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Education and Her Majesty’s Treasury that relate to grants to the devolved institutions.

At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Wednesday 4 July—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill followed by remaining stages of the Ivory Bill.

Thursday 5 July—General debate on the principle of proxy voting followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 6 July—Private Members’ Bills.

I was delighted to launch EqualiTees this week in Parliament, celebrating 100 years of some women getting the vote. I wish the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and all those taking part in the Great Exhibition of the North all the best for a successful 80 days of amazing exhibitions, artwork and live performances. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush on 22 June, we reflect on the huge contribution made by the Windrush generation to rebuilding the country following the war. Finally, I am sure the whole House will welcome the introduction of the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill this afternoon. I should like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her excellent work on this matter.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I note that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is away on Committee business and I welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) to these proceedings.
I am pleased that we have the business for the next two weeks. It is very interesting and very important, but there could be some mistake. I am sure that the Leader of the House will notice that there is a mistake. On 5 July, it is Back-Bench business.

The Secretary of State for Health wears the badges to remind everyone that he is the Secretary of State for Health. The Government make a big announcement just before the Brexit vote and then they do not schedule a debate on the 70th anniversary, celebrating 70 years of the NHS. I wonder whether that is because it was a Labour Government who innovated the NHS, a Labour Government who enacted it, and there have been record levels of investment by Labour Governments since 1997—nothing from the Government. There is no Brexit dividend because the Minister confirmed yesterday that the money will come from taxes. Does the Leader of the House agree with the Minister? Will she schedule a debate in Government time to congratulate the NHS because the shadow Health Secretary has many unanswered questions following the statement?

The Government criticise, as the Prime Minister did yesterday, the health service in Labour Wales, yet since 2010 they have cut back the block grant and reduced the capital grant by 10% and the revenue grant by 6%. They are also thwarting economic growth by stalling on a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. When will the Government make a statement on the decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon?

I note and welcome the Government’s move, under Standing Orders 57 and 9(6), to present the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill and introduce the Second Reading of the Bill—there is a business of the House motion at the end of the day—but can the Leader of the House confirm that the Bill will have all its stages before the start of the festival season? My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) has asked that question.

With regard to the Edinburgh festival, I hope that the Bill will apply to everyone—men, including men in kilts, and women. It is good to see that the Government are using Standing Orders, but it is a pity that they have not applied to that money resolutions on private Members’ Bills.

Despite the written statement by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, hon. Members wanted to include the “meaningful vote” in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, because it appears that the Government are flouting conventions; they are changing the convention on Committees of the House. They gave themselves a majority on the Selection Committee, even though, by convention, they should not have a majority without an overall majority in the House.

Yesterday, I was standing right next to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) to vote. Can the Leader of the House ensure, through discussions with the usual channels, that the nodding through process will continue to be the convention in the House and that Government Whips cannot break it at their whim?

This Government appear to lack moral authority. They have lost their place in the world as a moral force. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) asked the Prime Minister: what does it take to withdraw the invitation to the President of the United States, whose policy is to separate children from their parents and make them sleep under foil? The Prime Minister could have telephoned the President and told him that this is barbaric and inhumane. This country was one of the founding framers of the European convention on human rights and the League of Nations and the birthplace of Mary Wollstonecraft, Tom Paine and others. The policy may have changed, but can the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister, on behalf of the citizens of the United Kingdom, to tell the President that that was not and never will be acceptable?

Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary on behalf of four-year-old Gabriella Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who had her birthday last week and has been separated from her mother, when will we see the release of Nazanin? Today marks 810 days of her imprisonment on spurious charges.

Finally, I want to send Heidi Alexander all good wishes for her new post. She will use her talents in Mayor Khan’s office, and we welcome the talents of her successor. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who was the candidate support, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) will continue her parents’ tradition of brilliantly serving our country.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I share the hon. Lady’s excitement on behalf of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is at the highland games. I said to him yesterday that I was a bit suspicious he might be nursing a hangover from attending the Rolling Stones concert on Tuesday night, which I was pleased to also be at; we had that in common. He told me that he was in the backing group for the Rolling Stones once—absolute respect; that is amazing. I hope he has a great time at the games, and I welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) to his place.

The hon. Lady asked about the NHS and made some claims. I am sure she will be delighted to welcome the announcement of a growth in health funding of 3.4% on average each year, taking it up to £20.5 billion per year by 2023. That is superb news for the NHS.

In terms of the Brexit dividend, at the moment, the United Kingdom gives between £8 billion and £10 billion each year to the European Union that we do not get back in either a rebate or payment for things such as farming or structural funds. When we leave the EU, we will not be making those net contributions of £8 billion to £10 billion each year, so the truth is that there will be money available for other priorities. The Opposition can say, “Well, that’s all spent because of what happens to the economy,” but that is for another day. What happens to the economy is business as usual. The fact is that money currently paid to the EU will not be in the future.
The hon. Lady asked about Swansea bay. We want to ensure that the UK has a diverse, secure and affordable energy mix for not just the next few years but generations to come. She will be aware that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continues to consider value for money with the Welsh devolved Administration and will make an announcement soon on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

The hon. Lady asked about the withdrawal Bill and suggested that there is some kind of confusion over what has been agreed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union outlined in his letter to the Chair of the Procedure Committee:

“Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion when it is introduced by the Government under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or is not in fact cast in neutral terms and hence whether the motion is or is not amendable.”

I hope that that clarifies it.

The hon. Lady asked about nodding through. She is right that the convention is for Members to be nodded through when there is reasonable notice and serious illness. I was particularly sorry to see that the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) was forced to come and vote here while she was unwell, but the fact that she had to come all the way from Bradford when she was so unwell is clearly a matter for her party. It is simply not right to accuse the Government of putting her in that position when the first notice the Government were given was just before midday. Her party should have sorted out an arrangement in much better time. I am not personally privy to those discussions, but communication clearly needs to improve, and that should be resolved privately.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) talked about moral authority and the issue of separating children—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have side discussions. There is clearly considerable unhappiness about the matter, but it cannot be resolved now, and the Leader of the House should be able to proceed with her answers.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Member for Walsall South raised the serious point about children being separated from their parents, and she is right to do so. It is appalling and absolutely wrong, and I was certainly relieved to see the Executive order signed yesterday by the President of the United States. However, we must not mix that up with the importance of the relationship we have with the United States, one of our key strategic relationships. It is important that we continue to deal with the office of the presidency of the United States, regardless of what our views are on particular decisions.

The hon. Lady mentioned Gabriella Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s fourth birthday. I absolutely agree that it is appalling that this poor child continues to be separated from her mother. I absolutely assure the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary does everything he can to continue to raise this matter and to plead for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a delusion of Whiggish modernists that they know the worst of mankind has been consigned to the past. Cicero said, “Know thyself,” and in our time in this place, some local authorities are holding what have been dubbed “Dickensian” paupers’ funerals. The relatives of the deceased are banned from them. They are even prohibited from receiving their loved ones’ remains. Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to come to make an urgent statement confirming that statutory guidance will be issued assuring that all those who grieve are treated with decency and dignity? You know, Mr Speaker, that when Mozart died, his body was cast into a mass paupers’ grave. If his work was the rhythm of heaven, these paupers’ funerals are now the rhyme of hell.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very serious issue. He will be aware that every local authority in the UK has a statutory duty to make arrangements for these so-called paupers’ funerals, when a person has died in circumstances where the family cannot be traced or when no funeral arrangements have been made for that person. He is right to point out that these are no frills funerals and there are limitations to the involvement of families, unless the families get involved in arranging, for example, for a religious minister or a civil celebrant to be present at the funeral. I encourage my right hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can ask Ministers directly about what more could be done.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) will get such a debate. As the Leader of the House says, he has raised an extremely serious matter, but it is no bad thing that he has done so, characteristically, with the eloquence of Cicero.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is at the royal highland show, a large gathering full of braying animal noises and dubious atmospheric conditions—he is missing the House of Commons already.

I should say that SNP Members fully support the voyeurism Bill, but upskirting and, indeed, upkiting has already been outlawed by the Scottish Parliament, so I do not know how much we will be able to participate in the proceedings if they fall under the English votes for English laws procedure.

The participation of Scottish Members in legislation has been a bit of a hot topic. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has completed its parliamentary stages in the face of the Scottish Parliament’s refusal to grant a legislative consent motion. Will the Leader of the House confirm what the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister for the Cabinet Office have not confirmed, which is that the Bill will not be sent for Royal Assent until agreement has been reached with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, because those are the terms of the Sewel convention? If she cannot do so, will she tell us when the Privy Council will be meeting to grant Royal Assent, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the Leader of the SNP Members, may like to attend those proceedings?
We are grateful to have notice of two weeks of business—it is a refreshing change—but I notice that no Opposition day is scheduled during the next fortnight. Given that the last SNP Opposition day was in November, I think the third party in this House is a bit overdue another one.

In that context, will the Leader of the House tell us whether the Government policy on voting on Opposition days has changed again? We went through the Lobbies twice on Tuesday, after months of Government abstention, and I do not know why the Opposition parties should have to find arcane parliamentary procedures simply to force the Government into the Lobby. If they disagree with a motion, they should have the guts to put it to the House.

Finally on Divisions, surely it is time for change. The sight of seriously ill Members being pushed through and of heavily pregnant Members being forced through the Lobbies is totally undignifying to this place. The usual channels, nodding through and so on simply will not cut it any more. As I said to the Leader of the House last week, it is simply not safe, and it is time for change, so when will we have a proper review of the voting procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Member who is replacing the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, First—the hon. Member for Walsall South asked me about this but I did not answer—the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill will, of course, include upskirting. That might not be a matter for the hon. Gentleman in Scotland, but it will be in England in future.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Sewel convention, and he will be aware that the Government have followed the spirit and letter of the devolution settlement at every stage of the process. The Sewel convention states that the UK Parliament will not normally legislate in areas of devolved competence without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman should look again at the statement by the Scottish Minister for UK Negotiations on Scotland’s Place in Europe, who said that these are “not normal times”. The Government continue to seek to collaborate with the devolved Administration, but it is important that no nation of the United Kingdom can be allowed to have a veto, thereby undermining the UK single market, which is worth £46 billion to the Scottish economy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about an Opposition day for the Scottish National party, and that will be considered and announced through the usual channels. He asked also about the policy on votes on Opposition days, but, as he is aware, I have been clear that there is no policy for such votes. If there is a decision by the House to support a motion but the Government decide not to vote, they will come forward with a statement within 12 weeks to set out clearly how they intend to address the issues that were raised and agreed on by the House. There will be a clear response whether or not the Government vote, and in the meantime the Government continue to take part fully in every Opposition day debate.

The hon. Gentleman asked about electronic voting. He will be aware that that is a matter for the House. Procedures are reviewed on an ongoing basis, but that issue is not something the House is currently considering. On issues of pregnancy and nodding through MPs, I tabled a debate on proxy voting for 5 July because I believe it is vital that new parents have the opportunity to form that secure early bond with their babies, and we must facilitate that. All Members should have the opportunity to discuss and debate how we do that, and to give their views. Let me be clear that all those who are currently pregnant and imminently expecting babies have been offered a pair. That has been committed to, and will continue to be available.

Michelle Donelan: Everyone should have a roof over their head, and the Government are tackling homelessness with a range of measures. Last week Wiltshire was awarded an additional £312,000 to tackle the issue. May we have a statement in the House to summarise the range of measures that this Government are taking to tackle homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. No one should ever have to sleep rough, and the Government are taking significant action. We are working to halve rough sleeping by 2022, and to end it completely by 2027. Some new measures include a £30 million fund for 2018-19, targeted at those local authorities that have high numbers of people sleeping rough. More than £600 million is available for use by local government to prevent homelessness, instead of just responding to it. Our new rough sleeping team is made up of homelessness experts who can provide ideas on what more can be done, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 takes a completely different approach to trying to eliminate this appalling problem.

Mr George Howarth: Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the Regulator of Social Housing’s regulatory notice that was issued yesterday to Knowsley Housing Trust, highlighting its failure to keep fire safety information up to date, thereby putting tenants at risk? Such a debate would give me the opportunity to urge those in senior executive and board positions in that organisation to take responsibility for their part in those failures, and to consider their positions.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise that concerning issue. I had the great pleasure of campaigning for the seat of Knowsley South back in 2005, and I well remember some of the housing in Knowsley that could be liable to the risk of fire if not properly protected. He will know that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 applies to all non-domestic premises and to those areas used in common in multi-occupied residential buildings. Under that order, the responsible person must undertake, and regularly review, the fire risk assessment and put in place adequate and appropriate fire precautions.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: May we please have a debate about how councils deal with Travellers? This week, we have had an enormous invasion in Taunton, which affects my constituency because it is a joint council, at a company called Summerfield. They mucked up the park and ride in another part of the town and have now set up home in the council’s old headquarters, which is costing £11 million to refurbish. We must have a debate on this situation, which is getting worse across councils. May we have time to discuss this thorny issue?
Andrea Leadsom: I am aware that many hon. and right hon. Members frequently raise the problem of Travellers. My hon. Friend will be aware that we recently had a debate on this very problematic area. The Government are looking at whether there is in fact a weakness in the regulation or whether more could be done to enforce what are already very strong rules around Travellers.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I was disappointed with what the Leader of the House said about the nodding through problem yesterday, because it did not marry with my understanding of the facts of the situation in terms of how I was supporting my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). I am, however, pleased that the right hon. Lady announced a debate on proxy voting on 5 July. Will it include consideration of the Procedure Committee’s report on this issue? If not, why not? While considering the Procedure Committee’s work, she might look back at the report on private Members’ Bills, which, had it been accepted, would have prevented the fracas around upskirting on Friday.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is vital that we enable new parents to spend the critical early periods of time with their new baby. I am absolutely supportive of that. In response to the hon. Gentleman’s specific question, yes the debate is deliberately timed. As he will recall, I asked the Procedure Committee last November to look into proxy voting. I was delighted with the Committee’s work in producing a report. My Government response to it is due on 15 July. I wanted to have that general debate, so that the constitutional implications of proxy voting, as opposed to other forms of formalised pairing, for example, and who should operate proxy voting if it were to be introduced and so on, can be properly aired in this place before I give a considered response to the work of the Procedure Committee, for which I am very grateful.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already rightly mentioned the importance of the early bond between parents and babies. Unfortunately, in Staffordshire we are seeing a reduction in the number of health visitors, who are absolutely key to that. I know that the county council and the NHS have been working hard to try to resolve this, but does the Leader of the House agree it is important that we have a debate on how vital health visitors are to assist parents and work with them as they create that bond with their children?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must do everything we can to support those critical early days. I am delighted that the Department of Health and Social Care is committed to providing continuity of carer, through a continued midwifery team that the mother and father-to-be get to know during the course of the pregnancy, and committed to training many more midwives with mental health qualifications to support vulnerable parents. He is right to raise the issue of health visitors, who provide such invaluable support in the early days. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and, in particular, for her good wishes for the Great Exhibition of the North, the 80-day festival celebrating the whole of the north of England and all it has to offer. The launch event is tomorrow evening and I will be attending, if I am spared that long.

A significant number of Back Benchers are waiting with applications for debates in this House through the Backbench Business Committee. I very much welcome the general debate on proxy voting on 5 July and the half-day of Backbench Business on that day, but I hope the Leader of the House can find a way of securing 12 and 19 July for the Backbench Business Committee. The anniversary debate for the tobacco control plan will take place on 19 July if we are allocated that time. Lastly, I note with interest that the Leader of the House attended the Rolling Stones concert on Tuesday evening.

Andrea Leadsom: Watching Mick Jagger doing “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” was pretty impressive actually—I was thinking that I am not sure I would even remember the words, let alone how to jump around on stage like that. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his bids for Back-Bench time. Of course, they will always be very carefully considered, and we always do seek to give Back-Bench time in response to reasonable requests. I am sure that he will be spared and wish him the most successful Great Exhibition of the North; I hope he sincerely enjoys it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is clearly excellent news that the NHS is going to get additional funding, but can I urge my right hon. Friend to stage a debate in Government time so that we can explore not only what the priorities will be for the national health service, but how savings can be made by using such opportunities as International Yoga Day, which is today? I remind colleagues that there are sessions in Victoria Tower Gardens at 2 o’clock, and at 4 o’clock and 6 o’clock in Committee Room 14, to celebrate.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend does a good job of promoting his own events, as I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker. He will be aware that the House has had a number of recent opportunities to debate matters relating to health, including an Opposition day just before the recess. We have had very good Westminster Hall debates on the 70th anniversary of the NHS and on raising standards of infection prevention and control. We have Health and Social Care questions next week, and I encourage him to ask Ministers directly then what can be done so that all Members can discuss what the health priorities should be as we approach the 70th anniversary.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for finally scheduling the debate on the Government’s serious violence strategy. How will she ensure that the Government keep the House updated on how the strategy is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, because she has played an enormous part and made a huge contribution to the Government’s work on the serious violence strategy. She will be aware that we will be bringing forward the Offensive Weapons Bill, which will seek to make it even more difficult for people to access things such as knives and corrosive substances. That will be a very important part of this, but specifically on the serious violence strategy, there will continue to
be regular meetings of Ministers, different community groups and the police, and I am sure that Ministers will come to this place to keep the House updated on the progress against their targets.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Nicki Regan and Ashleigh McArthur of Zoo Hair & Beauty in Stirling on being named Britain’s bridal make-up specialists of the year? Zoo Hair & Beauty is a small business success story. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the enterprise economy, and specifically on small and medium-sized businesses such as that of my award-winning constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents at Zoo Hair & Beauty. What a fantastic tribute. I am sure that all of us love a good wedding and we will all be queuing up, if we know of anyone, to seize their services. I am absolutely delighted on their behalf.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate, to be led by the Treasury, on the mythical Brexit dividend? This would enable the Chancellor to set out in clear and simple words, for the benefit of serial offenders such as the Foreign Secretary, why any Brexit dividend has been more than washed away by the ongoing payments that are going to be made to the EU and a slowdown in the UK economy, and that any increase in NHS investment will come from tax increases and not the so-called Brexit dividend.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is a bit of an Eeyore on this subject, is he not? Let us be honest. He asks for a Treasury Minister to come and set out what is happening to the economy. He will no doubt be delighted to know that employment is at a record high, real wages are up, the OECD has upgraded growth forecasts for this year and next, and a business survey shows that we remain the No. 1 destination for foreign investment. forecasts for this year and next, and a business survey shows that we remain the No. 1 destination for foreign investment. We are delighted to know that employment is at a record high, real wages are up, the OECD has upgraded growth forecasts for this year and next, and a business survey shows that we remain the No. 1 destination for foreign investment.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents at Zoo Hair & Beauty. What a fantastic tribute. I am sure that all of us love a good wedding and we will all be queuing up, if we know of anyone, to seize their services. I am absolutely delighted on their behalf.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Maternity services at the Horton hospital and Chipping Norton are of paramount importance to my constituents in west Oxfordshire. May we have a Government statement on future services, so that my constituents can be assured of their bright future?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome the news of the Prime Minister’s commitment to increase funds for the NHS by £20.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24. I know that he cares deeply about services at the Horton and in the wider Oxfordshire area, as indeed do I and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has recently reviewed the concerns raised by Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and has asked the NHS locally to work with stakeholders—including us as local MPs—to address them.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Leader of the House said that an announcement about the Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be made “soon”, which I do not think is good enough for the thousands of manufacturing and highly skilled technical jobs across south Wales and the west country. Moreover, renewable energy is the energy of the future; it will power our future manufacturing industries. May we have a debate in Government time about the renewable energy industry?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady will know, we are ensuring that the UK has a diverse, secure and affordable energy mix. We are looking carefully at the potential to harness the UK’s natural resources to make our energy mix sustainable and affordable for the future. Through competition and innovation, the leadership that we have shown has resulted in dramatic reductions in the cost of renewable energy projects. Over the last two years, for example, the cost of offshore wind has halved, which means that we can secure a larger amount of electricity generation for every pound of bill payers’ money. That is absolutely essential. The UK is doing incredibly well in renewables, in both European and world terms.
As I have said, Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continue to look at the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project with Welsh devolved Administration Ministers, and they will come forward as soon as they can.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The menopause is a natural stage of life that affects every woman, and also every man who lives or works with a woman, but I have not heard it talked about in this place since I have been a Member. May we have a debate on this extremely important issue? More specifically, how can we encourage clinical commissioning groups to implement the important guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, so that every woman can have the treatment that she needs to enjoy this stage of her life?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important and valid point. I was interested to hear yesterday of a report that found that in our 50s we enter perhaps the most happy time of our life, which those suffering under menopause might challenge. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this at a future Equalities questions, and ask Ministers if something on it could be forthcoming for this Chamber.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Countries including Israel and Spain have recently introduced legislation to prohibit organ tourism in China in response to persistent and credible reports of systematic state-sanctioned organ harvesting from non-consenting prisoners of conscience in the People’s Republic of China, including Falun Gong practitioners and other religious and ethnic minority groups. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate or statement on this important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a horrific issue by which I am sure all hon. Members will be appalled. I encourage him to raise it at Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs questions next Tuesday, when he can ask Ministers what the UK can do to try to put a stop to this appalling practice.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The Mandarin Oriental hotel and the Glasgow School of Art both recently suffered devastating fires while undergoing renovation. Will my right hon. Friend consider making a statement relating to her constituents, and she might wish to raise it directly with Ministers at the statement to follow?

Andrea Leadsom: The convention is for Members to raise points relating to their constituents, and she might wish to raise it directly with Ministers at the statement to follow.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Several constituents have recently come to me to request help with reconsiderations and appeals of Department for Work and Pensions decisions to stop their benefits. Many of these constituents have trouble filling out the forms because of learning disabilities. When may we have a debate specifically about the accessibility and appropriateness of DWP appeal procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious point relating to her constituents, and she might wish to raise it directly with Ministers at the statement to follow on universal credit.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Dorset and Somerset are now reorganising their local government, which in the south-west leaves Gloucestershire and Devon as the only authorities yet to undergo reform towards becoming unitary authorities. Will the Leader of the House ask the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to instigate a debate so we can see how we can follow suit in Gloucestershire, let alone Devon?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have sought to ensure that local communities make these decisions for themselves, but I encourage him to take this up directly with HCLG Ministers so that he can be advised by them on what steps he can take.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Leader of the House has this morning confirmed that the Government will lay their version of my Voyeurism (Offences) Bill before Parliament. I thank the Government for moving as swiftly as they have this week and hope we will now secure this uncontroversial but essential change in the law. I thank everybody for the cross-party support this matter has received. I hope the House will later today unanimously support the Government’s motion to continue our important work on Second Reading. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has asked this question but it was unanswered, so I will ask it again: can the Leader of the House confirm the timetable for Second Reading, Committee and remaining stages in the Commons of the Bill, and will she do everything she can to ensure that the Bill progresses with the full support of both Houses?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady on behalf of the whole House for her assiduous work. She will realise that the Bill has cross-House support, and the
Government were pleased to bring it forward in Government time as urgently as possible. As for her specific question, I will write to her with an indication of when we expect the Bill to achieve all its stages.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I draw the Leader of the House's attention to my early-day motion 1401. [That this House congratulates the Year 6 students of South Hetton Primary School for using their Go Givers class project to create a PPP Campaign to raise the issue of period problems and poverty; commends the Year 6 students at that school for collecting donations of sanitary items to create pants packs to help women and girls who are homeless or in poverty to meet their sanitary needs; also thanks the local community for donating to the campaign that will continue until the end of the summer term; believes access to sanitary products is a basic human right and welcomes the initiatives in Scotland and Wales to provide free sanitary products to low income families; and calls on the Government to adopt a similar initiative for England to end period poverty in the UK.]

Does the Leader of the House agree that the Government should be doing more to address period poverty? Will she join me in commending the work of year 6 staff and students at South Hetton Primary School in my constituency and their efforts at raising awareness of the issue by creating “pants packs” to help families who are unable to afford proper sanitary products?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising an issue that does not often get mentioned in the Chamber. It is vital that all girls and young women are able to provide themselves with proper sanitary protection, and being unable to deal with menstruation is humiliating for a young person. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to ask Ministers directly what more we can do to ensure that no girl or young woman needs to suffer the absolute embarrassment of being unable to afford sanitary protection.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My two young constituents Somer and Areeb Bakhsh are 15 and 13 years old respectively, and I was delighted to present them with academic excellence awards at Springburn Academy just a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately, they face deportation to Pakistan because their family’s asylum application was rejected on the basis that they are a Christian family and would not face persecution in Pakistan, despite clear death threats being made to them. Will the Leader of the House call for a statement from the Immigration Minister on the threats facing religious minorities in Pakistan?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency point. There can be no excuse for administrative errors that cause people real problems. She will be aware that the Immigration Minister will be here later today for a statement, so she may want to raise that point directly with her, or if she wants to write to me, I can take it up with the Minister on her behalf.

Mr Speaker: I can only assume that “screw-up” is a technical term that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) has devised to describe the situation that displaces her.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My constituent Yaser has been living, working and training as a GP in south Manchester for nine years, but he has been told that no local surgery can afford to sponsor his visa renewal application. As a result, he will be forced to go back to Canada in August instead of serving the community in which he was trained. May we have a debate on what more we can do to support GP surgeries in recruiting much-needed doctors from abroad?

Andrea Leadsom: We are all incredibly grateful to those who come here from other countries to work in our health service and provide us with so much support. The hon. Gentleman raises another important Home Office issue, so I encourage him to raise it with the Immigration Minister during the statement later today, or if he wants to write to me, I can take up the matter on his behalf.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Scotland’s Bravest Manufacturing Company, located on the site of Erskine Hospital in my constituency, is a social enterprise that proudly provides employment opportunities for veterans. The Scottish Government’s veterans fund has provided substantial financial backing, allowing it to recruit more former servicemen and women. Can we have a debate on employment opportunities open to ex-service personnel and on the struggles many face in attempting to secure employment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We all know that life can often be quite difficult for veterans of our armed forces, and we know homelessness and a lot of other problems can ensue. I commend his constituency’s social mission to try to improve the work prospects for veterans. I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate to raise directly with Ministers what more can be done to provide for our armed forces personnel as they leave the services.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is the top issue in my constituency, and it is one I have raised with the Leader of the House on a number of occasions. Today BBC Radio Humberside is running a story about the aggressive begging, shoplifting, drug taking and drunkenness on Newland Avenue in my constituency. With a background of cuts to addiction services, cuts to police budgets, cuts to council budgets and the houses in multiple occupation by vulnerable
people who do not get the support they need, can we please have a debate in Government time? I do not think this perfect storm is just in Hull; I think it is in many constituencies across the country.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the issue of antisocial behaviour quite frequently, and she is right to do so. I am very sorry to hear about the problems her constituents in Hull are experiencing. She will be aware that, including from council tax, there will be up to £450 million of additional investment in policing in 2018-19. It is for police and crime commissioners to look at how they can best deal with the challenges faced in their local communities, but I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so she can raise the particular issues facing Hull.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House knows that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. Having said that, library budgets are being cut and it does not look very good for libraries in the city of culture to be cut as a result of Government cuts. She will know that libraries are often a gateway for people to learn about culture in the first place.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the city of culture status that Coventry will have, and I applaud him for raising the issue of libraries. He will know that, right across the country, there is a transformation in libraries. Many are coming under community ownership, as local authorities seek to improve the use of local funding. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so he can raise the issue for Coventry directly with Ministers.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A more enlightened US President, John F. Kennedy, once said “the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.” Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the US Government’s decision to abandon the United Nations Human Rights Council, so cynically announced on World Refugee Day, and to allow Members to register their abhorrence at the Trump Administration’s decision to detain children and babies in camps, separate from their parents, on the US-Mexico border?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said, the separation of babies and children from their parents is absolutely unacceptable, and we were all glad to see the executive order that was signed yesterday. On the decision of the United States to withdraw from the Human Rights Council, the UK’s position is that we want to see reform of the Human Rights Council but we are committed to working to strengthen it from within. Our support for the Human Rights Council remains steadfast. It is the best tool the international community has to address impunity in an imperfect world and to advance many of our international goals, so we deeply regret the decision made by the United States.

Valerie Vaz: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask the Leader of the House to correct the record, because she seemed to indicate that pairing and slipping arrangements were available, but they were not? As I said, I was there when such an arrangement was requested for a certain hon. Member—I do not want to go into too much detail about individuals—but it was not granted. A pair was available for only one hon. Member who was about to give birth. The Leader of the House may want to take advice on this and perhaps write to me, but will she correct the record, because what she said earlier was wrong?

Mr Speaker: I think the Leader of the House wishes to respond.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely stand by what I said, which is that pairs had been committed to for all those who are in late stages of pregnancy. It is a convention for Members to be nodded through where reasonable notice is given and where there is serious illness. Yesterday at 11.55 am, Labour requested that six Members be nodded through. The Government made efforts to make what arrangements they could in the short time provided. This is a matter for the usual channels, but I stand by what I said.
Universal Credit and Welfare Changes

11.50 am

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): This Government are delivering the biggest changes to the welfare state in a generation. We are building a benefits system fit for the 21st century, helping more people into work by providing tailored support and more financial support for the most vulnerable. These changes are designed to reflect not only the technological age we live in, which is having a significant impact on work and communications, but people’s working lives. We are providing extra support for childcare costs, and offering flexibility to look after children or elderly parents. Our reforms take into account flexible working, self-employment, multiple jobs, the gig economy and societal changes, particularly the growing awareness of mental health conditions, which is strongly linked to the impact on work and communications, but people’s working lives. We are providing extra support for childcare costs, and offering flexibility to look after children or elderly parents. Our reforms take into account flexible working, self-employment, multiple jobs, the gig economy and societal changes, particularly the growing awareness of mental health conditions, which is strongly linked to the changing pace of life and the barrage of constant communications.

We are succeeding in our aim to reshape the system and provide for the most vulnerable. So far, we have supported nearly 3.4 million more people into work since 2010—that is more than 1,000 people a day every day since 2010—producing a record rate of getting people in work and the lowest unemployment level since the 1970s. We are also spending £54 billion on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—this is up £9 billion since 2010. We are also supporting a record 600,000 disabled people who have entered work over a four-year period.

Universal credit is a brand new benefits system. It is based on leading-edge technology and agile working practices. Our strategy is based on continuous improvement, whereby we are listening, learning and adapting our delivery as the changes roll out across the country. The result will be a tailor-made system, based on the individual. This is a unique example of great British innovation, and we are leading the world in developing this kind of person-centred system. Countries such as New Zealand, Spain, France and Canada have met us to see UC, to watch and learn what is happening for the next generation of benefit systems. Let us not forget that we are introducing this new system because the legacy regime it replaces was outdated, not only in terms of an ageing IT infrastructure that was built in the 1980s, but in the way it trapped people in unemployment and disenchanted work.

Today, I am updating the House on the changes we have made to UC as a result of this iterative approach we are taking. That is why last autumn we abolished the seven waiting days from the application process; we put in place the two-week housing benefit run-on to smooth the transition for an applicant moving to UC from the previous system; we ensured that advance payments could be applied for from day one of the application process, for up to 100% of a person’s indicative total claim; and we extended the recovery period for these advances to 12 months. Extra training was given to our work coaches to embed these changes.

Prior to that, we also changed the UC telephone lines to a freephone number to ensure ease of access for claimants inquiring about their claim. Earlier this year we reinstated housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds, and ensured that kinship carers are exempt from tax credits changes. Just last week, we announced changes to support the severely disabled when they transition on to UC; within our reforms, we want to ensure that the most vulnerable get the support they need. These proactive changes were made to enhance our new benefits system.

Our modifications to UC have been made alongside significant changes to personal independence payments, to reflect the Government’s support for disabled people and all types of disabilities—unlike the system before UC, which focused on physical disabilities. In fact, within week one of my entering this job, I took the decision not to continue with the historic appeal regarding a High Court judgment on the PIP-amending regulations, in order to support people suffering from overwhelming psychological distress. We have committed to video recording PIP assessments so that everyone involved can be sure of their fair and reviewable outcome, and earlier this week we announced a more practical approach to the assessment of claimants with severe degenerative diseases. Those patients who receive the highest awards will no longer be required to attend regular face-to-face interviews repeatedly to verify their difficult and debilitating circumstances.

Let me turn to the report on universal credit published last week by the National Audit Office, which did not take into account the impact of our recent changes. Our analysis shows that universal credit is working. We already know that it helps more people into work, and to stay in work, than the legacy system. Universal credit has brought together six main benefits, which were administered by different local and national Government agencies. Once fully rolled out, it will be a single, streamlined system, reducing administration costs and providing value for money for all our citizens. The cost per claim has already reduced by 7% since March 2018 and is due to reduce to £173 by 2024-25—around £50 less per claim than legacy cases currently cost us to process.

Beyond the timespan of the NAO report, we have greatly improved our payment timeliness: around 80% of claimants are paid on time, after their initial assessment period. Where new claims have not been paid in full and on time, two thirds have been found to have some form of verification outstanding. Verification is a necessary part of any benefits system and citizens expect such measures to be in place. We need to ensure that we pay the right people the right amount of money.

Upon visiting jobcentres, the NAO observed good relationships between work coaches and claimants. The results we are seeing are thanks to the exceptional hard work that our work coaches put in with claimants day in, day out. UC is projected to help 200,000 people into work, adding £8 billion per year to the economy when it is fully rolled out. Those are conservative estimates, based on robust analysis that has been signed off by the Treasury. At a user level, we know that 83% of universal credit claimants are happy with the service that they receive.

In conclusion, we are building an agile, adaptable system, fit for the 21st century. We want people to reach their potential, regardless of their circumstances or background, and we will make changes, when required, to achieve that ambition. I commend this statement to the House.
11.57 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement, but the Opposition believe that she should have come to the House on Monday to make a statement about both the damning National Audit Office report that was published last Friday and the Government’s decision, announced last Thursday, to put back the target for the completion of universal credit by another year—the sixth such delay. Rather than taking pride in not continuing with the appeal on PIP regulations, the Secretary of State should reflect on her Department being forced three times in the past year by legal challenges to review payments to disabled people.

Universal credit is the Government’s flagship social security programme, and the NAO report on it that was published last Friday is damning indeed. It concludes that universal credit is a major failure of public policy: it is failing to achieve its aims and, as it stands, there is no evidence that it will ever work. The report suggests that universal credit may cost more to administer than the benefits system that it replaces, and concludes that it has not delivered value for money, that it is uncertain whether it ever will, and that we will never be able to measure whether it has achieved its stated goal.

The Trussell Trust recently reported that food bank referrals have increased by 52% in areas where the full service of universal credit has been introduced in the past year, compared with 13% across the UK as a whole. In Hastings, food bank referrals went up by 80% following the roll-out of the full service. The Department for Work and Pensions does not measure whether claimants are experiencing hardship; is it not time that the Secretary of State woke up to the realities of poverty in the UK and instructed her Department to do so? Some 60% of claimants have asked for advanced payments, showing just how high the level of need out there is.

The Secretary of State says that universal credit is based on leading-edge technology and agile working practices. However, the National Audit Office report says that 38% of claimants were unable to verify their identity online and had to go to a jobcentre to do so. It makes no sense to accelerate the roll-out of universal credit at the same time as rapidly closing jobcentres. The NAO report reveals that a significant number of people struggle to make and manage their claim online. The Department for Work and Pensions’ own survey found that nearly half of claimants are unable to make a claim online unassisted, and that a fifth of claims are failing at an early stage because claimants are not able to navigate the online system.

The Government claim that the introduction of universal credit will result in 200,000 more people finding long-term work than under legacy benefits. They repeatedly cite evidence from 2014-15, but that was before the cuts to work allowances were introduced and covers only single unemployed people without children. If one looks at the range of claimants in areas where universal credit has been rolled out, there is no evidence that it is helping more people find long-term work. Delays in payments are pushing people into debt and rent arrears on such a scale that private and even social landlords are becoming increasingly reluctant to rent to universal credit claimants.

The NAO report also points out that 20% of claimants are not being paid in full and on time, and more than one in 10 are not receiving any payment on time. The people who are most at need from the social security system are the ones most likely to have to wait for payments. A quarter of carers, over 30% of families who need support with childcare and, most shockingly of all, two thirds of disabled people are not being paid in full and on time. The report points out that the Department does not expect the time limits of the payments to improve over the course of this year, and that it believes that it is unreasonable for all claimants to expect that they will be paid on time because of the need to verify each claim. Does the Secretary of State find the expectations of her own Department acceptable? She has made some claims that things have improved greatly since the closure of the report, so will she substantiate that by putting that information in the Library?

The impact of universal credit on some of our most vulnerable people is clear. Universal support is supposed to help people, but funding is severely limited and provision is patchy. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of it? Is she satisfied that her Department is doing enough to support people who are struggling?

Universal credit was supposed to offer personalised support to claimants, but stressed and overloaded staff are often failing to identify vulnerable claimants. The DWP is aiming to increase the workloads of work coaches fourfold and of case managers nearly sixfold as the Government try to cut the cost of universal credit still further.

The NAO is very clear that the DWP should not expand universal credit until it is able to cope with business as usual. The Government must now listen to the NAO, stop the roll-out of universal credit, and fix the flaws before any more people are pushed into poverty by a benefit that is meant to protect them from it. Universal credit is having a devastating impact on many people and will reach 8.5 million by 2024-25. The Secretary of State must now wake up to the misery being caused by her policy.

Ms McVey: First off, this was the earliest time that I could come to the House to make an oral statement. I sought to make a statement as soon as possible, which is why I am here today. Obviously, everyone will know what has been happening this week in the House.

On the legal changes that I have made, let me say that I took them from day one. I took them immediately. No one was forced to do that; I actually took the changes on myself with the rest of my team and also with Conservative MPs who came and told me what they would like to do. I also went out to visit various groups up and down the country. I felt that that was the best thing that we could do.

When this system is fully rolled out, it will be £50 cheaper per claim. It is an automated system and it is a personal tailored system. For those who cannot get access, or who are not sure about the IT and how to support it, we have given an extra £200 million to local authorities to support people—to help them with IT and to help them with debt—not that we would ever recognise that from the scaremongering of the Opposition.

Labour talks about poverty figures, but, compared with 2010 when it was last in office, there are now 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty. Rates of material deprivation among children and pensioners...
have never been lower, inequality has fallen and remains lower than in 2010, and according to the latest figures, out this week, inequality, because of our benefit and tax changes, has fallen by two-thirds in the last year. I wish the Opposition would keep up with the rapid changing of things.

We are helping more people into work. More than 3.2 million more people are in work—1,000 jobs every day since 2010. How much evidence do the Opposition need, for heaven's sake? The support is there, and now the advances. It was key we made those changes in the last Budget. We knew if people were having difficulty with the benefit, which was there to support them, we had to make those changes—the advances, the two-week run-on for housing benefit, stopping the waiting days—and now we find out that 4% of people are moving into work in fewer than six months and that 50% spend more time looking for work. That is the reality.

Please allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, to mention some of the real people I have met and spoken to and what they are saying about universal credit. Shafeeq, who was homeless, got an advance that got him temporary accommodation and put him in a better place to look for work. He said it “helped me out a great deal and I'd have been lost without it”. He is now in a job. Lisa said an advance payment helped her to secure a place with a childcare provider. She is paying it back over 12 months, which she says means a great deal to her. Gemma, a lone parent, said, “it's amazing being able to claim nearly all my childcare costs back, it's a real incentive to go out to work – I'm going to be better off each week”.

Ben in Devon had a work coach, who helped him to progress in work from day one. Ryan from Essex had a lack of work experience and confidence, and his work coach helped him through universal credit. I will end it there—with the people receiving the benefit.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. The NAO report is, to be frank, a shoddy piece of work. It has simply failed to recognise—[Interruption.] Genuinely; anyone who reads it—I do not know if anyone on the Opposition Benches has bothered—will realise how revolutionary this process is. If she does not agree, I will tell the House what many other Members have seen: a massive increase in the number of people who are facing financial hardship coming through my door. My office, in Scotland’s third city, already refers one person to a food bank every fortnight because of the actions of this Tory Government. The Government can no longer bury their head in the sand. They need to own up to these failings and make changes to improve the system.

Ms McVey: We have said quite clearly that this report is out of date and does not take into account the significant changes that we have made. The changes in the Budget were worth about £1.5 billion and the ones that are coming in are worth several billion pounds, but the report does not take that into account. Genuine people who get support from work coaches are saying, “It has transformed our lives.” I invite the hon. Lady to visit a jobcentre and meet the coaches in her area to see how revolutionary this process is. If she does not agree, she knows as well as I do that her party has considerable influence in these areas. I urge her to carry on and to tell the Public Accounts Committee to ask the question: who polices this policeman? This piece of work does it no credit at all. Will she now apply her efforts to universal support to make sure that every council area delivers the extra bit that is supposed to go alongside universal credit?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend has done more than most people in the House to support people into work, and I thank him for his question. He emphasises the point about universal support—the £200 million for local councils—to help people with debt management and IT. That is one thing we are definitely doing. Equally, he raises an important point about the NAO report. I am sure that Opposition Members have not read it. It does not say stop the roll-out; it says continue with the roll-out and do it faster. Please read about stuff before talking about it!

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. The NAO report was damning in its criticism of universal credit, and I am honestly surprised that anyone on the Government Benches could stand up and say they do not agree with it. This is what it does: it audits things. That is its role. I should not be surprised, though, because the Government have form. When the UN published its report on the rights of disabled people, a Minister stood up and said, “Problem? What problem? There’s no problem here”. They are trying to do exactly the same thing with this report.

The NAO in its report says it is not clear that universal credit will ever cost less to administer than the existing benefits system and that the Department will never be able to measure whether universal credit actually leads to 200,000 more people being in work.

Universal credit is pushing families into poverty and hardship. In addition to this report, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report has damningly criticised the sanctions regime, setting out how dreadful it is for individuals. A Trussell Trust report refers to the number of people needing to visit food banks in the areas where universal credit has been rolled out. Universal credit will be rolled out in my constituency later this year, and I am worried for my constituents. I expect what many other Members have seen: a massive increase in the number of people who are facing financial hardship coming through my door. My office, in Scotland’s third city, already refers one person to a food bank every fortnight because of the actions of this Tory Government. The Government can no longer bury their head in the sand. They need to own up to these failings and make changes to improve the system.

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend has spent considerable time investigating what works, and providing solutions and support. He is right that this is a test-and-learn process. Indeed, I ensured that that would be the focus, and it is what we will do for people, whether they are self-employed or disabled. Let me quote various charity
groups that have agreed with exactly what we have done. When I made the decision—along with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—to offer the housing element of universal credit to 18 to 21-year-olds, Shelter said that it was “thrilled”. The chief executive of Citizens Advice, Gillian Guy, said that the Budget changes would “make a significant difference to the millions of people who will be claiming Universal Credit”.

If only the NAO had read her words and produced its document accordingly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I cannot believe what I am hearing from the Government. They are in absolute denial, and not just about this report. In the past six months, there have been not one, not two, but three High Court decisions or tribunal rulings saying that the Government’s actions with regard to PIP and, most recently, with regard to severely disabled people transitioning on to UC, are discriminatory and unlawful—they have been made to change. But yesterday, the Minister for Disabled People said in a Westminster Hall debate that there was nothing unlawful or discriminatory about the Government’s actions. Does this not reflect what the UN called a “disconnect” between the “lived experience” of disabled people and this Government’s policies? What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that the implementation of all her policies recognises these judgments?

Ms McVeY: Again, I ask the hon. Lady to read the Court judgment. I had already made the decision on the disability premium. The Court did not ask the Government to alter the severe disability premium—we won on that point of law—so I ask the hon. Lady to digest the judgment properly. We have put in an extra £9 billion of health and disability funding to support people. In the last couple of years, we have got an extra 600,000 disabled people into work. That is what this is about—supporting the most vulnerable and helping more people into work. We have seen 3.2 million people move into work, including 600,000 disabled people. The hon. Lady should stop scaremongering. Should people have difficulties, I ask her to assist them so that they can get the best support for what they need. That is what Government Members are doing, and the figures reflect that.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Work and Pensions Committee went to Marylebone jobcentre this morning to see work coaches, who were genuinely excited about the UC roll-out that took place yesterday. I hope to find the same thing in my constituency tomorrow morning. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key to making this work is for work coaches to have the necessary skills, training, time and access to outside support so that they can give claimants the support that they need to get ready for work?

Ms McVeY: That is exactly right. Work coaches have received—and will continue to get—more training. People are talking about work coaches with a renewed enthusiasm because of the support that they are getting. Darren from Wales, who was put on a confidence course—we were utilising our flexible support fund—said:

“My...work coach was fantastic...helped me turn my life around...fulfilling a lifelong dream”.

That is what this is about—turning people’s lives around. I urge hon. Members to visit jobcentres and meet work coaches, who feel liberated for the first time ever because they are helping people into work.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State has read and digested her very own Department’s “Universal Credit Full Service Survey” of more than 1,000 claimants. Its results are as damming, if not more so, than the National Audit Office report. The survey shows that 40% of claimants are in real financial hardship after nine months on universal credit. Only half felt better off with more work, and only half could claim assisted. In the light of that report and all the other evidence before us, will the Secretary of State please listen to the National Audit Office’s recommendation that the programme should not expand before it can deal with higher claimant volumes? Some 100,000 people a month are moving on to universal credit this year, and there will be 200,000 people a month next year. This will affect 4 million families from the end of next year, and 40% of them must not be in hardship.

Ms McVeY: This is the same report that actually says that people are getting into work quicker, staying in work longer, progressing in work better and getting £600 more a month through our support. It is also the same report that focuses on the 16-hour benefit rule, that shows that people were locked out of work under the legacy system, and that shows that our plans will enable people to work 113 million extra hours a year because they are not locked on benefits.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and her Ministers for listening to suggestions to improve universal credit and welfare assessments. I specifically mention the introduction of video recording for work capability and PIP assessments. Will she update me on the roll-out of video recording?

Ms McVeY: I thank my hon. Friend for doing so much in this area. She often meets me to talk about ideas that she thinks would make considerable improvements, and one of her suggestions was video recording. We want to give people confidence in the system and to get transparency in the system, which is why we have said that we will implement the idea. Over the summer we will be testing and learning by working with disabled people and asking them, “Do you feel more confident with this? Is video recording what you want?” We have made a commitment to improve the process through recording.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I, too, was at Marylebone jobcentre as part of the Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into benefit sanctions. Given that the Secretary of State seems open to suggestions, may I suggest that she reviews the policy whereby a claimant can be sanctioned if they refuse a zero-hours contract? Could it not be counterproductive in the fight against poverty to move people from out of work into low-paid, insecure work?

Ms McVeY: Yes, of course I will listen to what is best with sanctions, because the key aim is not to give anybody sanctions, but to help people into work—that is what we need to do. Since benefits began, there has
always been some form of sanctions regime that says, “If you’re not living up to our expectations, this is what will happen,” but that is minimal on jobseeker’s allowance, and even less on employment and support allowance—less than 1%. We want to make sure that we get people into work, and if the hon. Gentleman has suggestions, I will meet him.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** We have heard a lot of huffing and puffing from Opposition Members, but they are not offering many solutions. Given that the National Audit Office has said that the Government should continue with universal credit, and that one of its criticisms was that that had not been rolled out quickly enough, does my right hon. Friend think that the Opposition’s solution of pausing universal credit in any way reflects the National Audit Office’s report? Will she continue making improvements to universal credit? I know that my constituents are grateful that she is looking at the issue regarding payment dates and assessment periods. I urge her to continue to look at the improvements that my constituents have suggested to her, rather than pausing universal credit, which would go completely against what the NAO has said.

**Ms McVey:** Thank you, my hon. Friend. I went with him to his local Trussell Trust to see what other changes we should be looking at, and one of them involved the payment system for people in work. Remember, this is the first time we have ever had a benefit system supporting people in work. Beforehand, it was always for people who were out of work. I pledged to look at that, and the team is doing so. As I said, we are supporting people.

What my hon. Friend says about the Opposition is quite right. The NAO did not say that we should stop universal credit; it said that we should carry on and, if anything, proceed more quickly. But remember, this is the Opposition who said that our changes in 2010 would result in 1 million more people being unemployed. How wrong they were, and how wrong they are again!

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** The NAO says that universal credit is expensive, massively delayed and over-complex, and that the Department will never be able to provide evidence that it helps more people into work. The Secretary of State says that everything is tickety-boo, and that this is a personal, tailor-made system based on the individual. Perhaps I could encourage her to meet my constituent, Augustin, who did not meet the minimum income floor and expected earnings under universal credit and has been made homeless as a result. She could meet him at my local food bank, which has seen a tripling in the number of children it supports as a direct result of universal credit roll-out. Will she meet him?

**Ms McVey:** A couple of things, starting with the minimum income floor: this was brought in for when people had set up a business and were getting paid below the minimum wage in order to support them and to help them to improve their business case, but so that if that was still not working, we could then say, “How do we help you to become employed, because self-employment is obviously not working for you?” That was why the minimum income floor was brought in. If anybody has been made homeless through this, I will meet them. We have advance payments and support, and our work coaches work with homelessness charities to achieve the exact opposite of that. In fact, I can tell the hon. Gentleman about countless cases where they have stopped people being homeless, but if that has not been the case for his constituent, we need to listen and get that changed rapidly.

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con):** I entered politics to enable people to get on in life and to open doors to opportunities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that universal credit is a fantastic example of doing that, given that it makes work pay and it is forecast to help 200,000 more people into work than jobseeker’s allowance did?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend is right. She came into Parliament to help the most vulnerable in society and to help people into work. That is what Conservative Members do, and it is what Opposition Members want to do, but our solutions and ways of doing things are working. I reiterate that an extra 3.2 million people are in work since 2010. Universal credit has come about because the world has significantly changed, even in the past 10 years. Think about technology, automation, what the world has changed. We have to deal with the gig economy, with flexible working hours, with part-time and multiple jobs, and with the difference in working life for people who have caring responsibilities for children and adults. That is what this system takes into account; the legacy system could not do that.

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** There might be 1 million more people in work, but there are also 1 million more people on poverty wages. Food banks used to be the exception to the rule, but they have now become part of the rule. More importantly, I have constituents who I listen to—not the Secretary of State—who are on the personal independence payment but are facing assessment delays and do not know when they will be paid. The process can take weeks and sometimes months, which creates great distress and can add to their illnesses and disabilities.

**Ms McVey:** Let me clarify that there are 3 million more people in work, not 1 million more. We listened to what MPs and local charities said, and we brought in extra support for anybody who needs money straightaway. That is why there is now a 100% advance straightaway, and it is why, when people move from one system to another, there is an extra two weeks of housing benefit to help them. We are adapting to change so that we make this work.

**Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who visited Stirling last week and held a roundtable meeting with representatives from the Stirling citizens advice bureau, our local food bank—Start Up Stirling—and Stirling Women’s Aid. It was a very useful meeting, but it was also an example of the engagement of this team of Ministers and their commitment to listening, for which I commend them. Will my right hon. Friend spell out what steps are being taken to improve claimants’ experience of the application and assessment process, especially disabled claimants and those with special needs?
Ms McVey: My hon. Friend talks about the commitment and engagement of all our Ministers and the Department, and about what work coaches do on a daily basis with local charities to get this running as smoothly as possible. I have talked about the extra £200 million going to local councils as part of grant funding, and 98% of councils have taken up that money in order to make the process easier for people, whether they are people with disabilities or those who cannot use IT. This is what we are doing to make the journey easier, and he is right to champion those people who need support.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): We have heard that the Secretary of State is keen to meet disability groups and disabled people, and that is fantastic, but perhaps she could tell us how we will improve the situation in which payments to disabled people are always late, never on time and never in full. This is borne out by our casework, and by some of the cases we heard about during my Westminster Hall debate yesterday.

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady says that payments are always late, never on time and not in full, but that is absolutely not correct—if [Interruption.] If I did not hear her right and she referred to two thirds of cases, she is still wrong. We need to make sure that people get support, and we know that they do. There is an extra £9 billion of support, whether that is financial support because people need it, or support to get them into work. We know that there are 600,000 more people in work in the last few years, and we are helping even more through Access to Work. Please look sometimes at the positive news and help your constituents a little bit more by focusing them on that additional support.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I assure the Secretary of State that I, too, have been to my local jobcentre and spoken to the staff there? I have heard that this is the best system to help people for 30 years—that comes from the horse’s mouth in Redditch.

I used to work in the software industry, and the point about this system is that it is agile. A system on this scale cannot be built in the way that the Opposition suggest; that is not how technology operates. The benefit of this system is that it can learn on an individual basis. The staff in the jobcentre said that there was a different experience for every single claimant, and that is how the system responds. The idea that we should stop it flies in the face of any kind of technology learning—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I want to get everybody in. Questions must be brief.

Ms McVey: It was lovely listening to my hon. Friend—my learned friend, who knows so much about technology—because those words needed to be heard. As I said, this is at the leading edge of technology. Great Britain is leading the way. Countries that are coming to see us range from Sweden to the United States, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, Canada, Cyprus, France and Denmark. They all want to know how it works to take it back home to their countries.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): When the former Secretary of State was assuring the House that universal credit implementation was going well, it was the National Audit Office that told us what was really happening. Its reports have never been shoddy and have never been scaremongering. They have embarrassed Ministers—that is true—but they have proved to be truthful. The Secretary of State will recognise many of the findings of this latest NAO report in warnings given by Opposition Members when she was in the Department four or five years ago. The central flaw, of course, is the very long wait that people have before they are entitled to receive cash. Her predecessor, who was in the job for only a short time, managed, greatly to his credit, to reduce the waiting time from six weeks to five. Will the Secretary of State commit to build on that progress and reduce the waiting time significantly further?

Ms McVey: I have heard the warnings from the Opposition before. I heard the warnings even about work experience and sector-based work academies—“Oh, we couldn’t do that for our young people.” We did, and youth unemployment dropped by over 43%. I have heard the warnings, and I appreciate that the Opposition do not like the way we do things, but the way we do things provides results—hence 1,000 more people in work every day since 2010.

I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman that my predecessor made significant changes in how we were rolling out this system. We have to make sure that waiting times are reduced as much as possible, but two thirds of those longer waiting times are due to a lack of verification. We need the verification to know whether people are legally entitled to benefit.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I would like to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), because he is right. The National Audit Office report says that the universal credit roll-out is slow, yet Opposition Members want to slow it down even further or even pause it. In noting that obvious tension, does my right hon. Friend agree that the pace of the roll-out, and the test-and-learn approach, mean that the system is continually improving and that people will always have the opportunity to get into work and be better off in work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is, again, correct. The NAO made it clear that the pace could do with speeding up. It also said that we should continue with universal credit, far from what the Opposition are saying. It said that we should speed up the pace and carry on going, and that progress had been made in what we are doing. I say to Members: please read the report.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Having visited the DWP offices in Stanley and Chester-le-Street in my constituency, can I agree with one thing that the Secretary of State said and say thank you to the staff for their work? However, a real fear has been raised with me by constituents who have poor IT skills. What more can we do to support these individuals and also to expand access to IT, because many libraries have been closed or have introduced restricted hours, which is a stumbling block for a lot of those individuals?

Ms McVey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning work coaches in such a positive way, because they are doing a significant amount of work, and I hear only praise wherever I go. The system needs to give
people support, whether with IT or debt. Support is
definitely there for IT—£200 million has gone to local
authorities. The jobcentre can point claimants in the
right direction, so I ask them please to go via the
jobcentre in these situations.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last
week, I met a constituent at my surgery who had
received just £11 for four hours’ work as a result of less
generous earnings disregards and a sharper clawback of
council debts than under legacy benefits. What estimates
has the Secretary of State made of those features in
terms of the continuing employment benefits that she
has talked about? Can we help her to approach the
Chancellor, as he prepares his autumn Budget, to ask
him to put money into the universal credit system to
improve the earnings disregards and to lower the rate at
which other debt is recovered?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady has a great deal of knowledge
in this area. I am more than happy to meet her so that
we can ensure that we have continuous learning and
continuous improvement. I am looking closely at the
debt repayment that she talks about. I am very much
focused on that at the moment. I would love to meet
her.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Despite what the right
hon. Lady says, some 40% of individuals are still not
able to access claims because of verification failures due
to a lack of IT. In rural areas such as mine, it may be six
to 10 miles to the nearest town or jobcentre. What steps
can she take to improve verification for individuals who
cannot access computers and cannot easily get to a
jobcentre or town?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair
point on how we get that connection. What we are
really focusing on now, as we continue with this continuous
improvement, is outreach work to the people who are
most in need or most isolated, maybe in a rural community,
to help them to get the support they need. That is a part
of our continuous improvement.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull
is one of the cities that is to see the roll-out of
universal credit later this year. We have already have high
levels of poverty, homelessness, and people using food
banks. Following the publication of the report, what
other measures does the Secretary of State plan to
introduce to make sure that, when universal credit is
rolled out in Hull, it is more successful than it has been
so far?

Ms McVey: We will make sure that it continues to be
successful where it goes, with more people in work more
quickly, staying in work and getting progress in work.
On average, people will get £600 a month more in work
through the extra support that the work coaches are
getting. I ask the hon. Lady, too, to go to a jobcentre to
find out what is going on and how we are helping
people.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am very
disappointed that the Secretary of State is blind to the
hardship that is being caused by this policy. Last night
in my constituency, a number of constituents, including
two of my staff, were involved in trying to raise money
for the East Durham Trust food bank through a sponsored
run. That food bank was completely depleted. May I
respectfully point out to her that it is depleted because
of the policies of this Government, particularly the
introduction of universal credit, delayed PIP appeals,
and sanctions that have been applied to my constituents?

Ms McVey: I am certainly not blind to hardship. We
all come into this House trying to prevent hardship.
Conservative Members believe that poverty and hardship
are prevented by getting people into work and supporting
them in work to allow them to fulfil their dreams, hopes
and ambitions. That is what we do. As I said, we have
provided significantly more money for the most vulnerable,
particularly for those with disability and health conditions.
We want to support people into work and reduce poverty.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): As a former member
of the Public Accounts Committee, I am very conscious
of how much that Committee—and, indeed, the House—
depends on National Audit Office reports. I remind the
House that the Department does agree with the NAO
on the veracity of those reports. Where there are issues,
then the Department can follow them up in the Public
Accounts Committee.

May I ask about the habitual residency test, which is
connected with universal credit claims? I have a constituent
who has been refused advance payment due to a delay
in her partner’s residency test, and it is not clear when
that will be completed. It would be helpful to understand
the timescales for the residency test. Can the Secretary
of State confirm whether, if the partner fails the residency
test, an entirely new claim will have to be made?

Ms McVey: We do not agree with all the conclusions
in the NAO report because it did not take into account
the impact of the changes. We agree with some of the
conclusions, such as the fact that we should continue
with the roll-out and speed it up and on the progress
made. The habitual residence test ensures that someone
is legally entitled to a benefit. Verification was increased
in 1994 and tightened in 2004. If someone fails the
habitual residence test, they can reapply three months
later when they can show that they have links to the
country.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I assure the Secretary of
State that I have read the NAO report in full, because I
like to know what I am speaking about. I also like to
know the lived experience of my constituents in Blaydon,
where the full roll-out of universal credit happened just
before Christmas. The NAO report certainly does reflect
the problems that my constituents face with late payments
and delays caused by all kinds of things. In particular, I
would like to refer to the problems that some constituents
with disabilities are having. A local voluntary organisation
came to talk to me recently about problems that a deaf
person is having, even with support, in claiming universal
credit. Will the Secretary of State look at the provisions
for people with disabilities, to ensure that they are able
to claim easily? Does she intend to follow any of the
recommendations in the NAO report?

Ms McVey: We agree that it is important for people
who are the most in need to get the most support. That
is what we are doing. We are training more staff in
different areas, including in disability needs, and working with various charities to ensure that that happens. However, I give another example. Caroline talks about access to work and mental health support. She has had bipolar disorder all her life but has now finally found a system that is helping her into work and listening to her. That is what our work coaches are about. We are helping more disabled people.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Last week in Prime Minister’s questions, I identified that the waiting time for appeals is 41 weeks for PIP and 30 weeks for ESA in the Gloucestershire area. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that universal credit appeals do not create further delays, so that people can try to get some justice?

Ms McVey: I heard the hon. Gentleman raise that last week. I want to reassure him that we are working with the Ministry of Justice to increase the number of judges and the number people on tribunal panels. We are also recruiting 150 presiding officers, to ensure that we understand what is going on and make the system smoother and quicker. We obviously need to ensure that that happens for PIP, for ESA and, should we need it, for UC.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What an utterly contemptible and triumphant statement we have just heard from the Secretary of State. With the brassiest of necks, she boasts of changes to universal credit that Opposition Members have continually called for, many of which this Government were dragged through the courts before making. Universal credit will be rolled out across Renfrewshire in September. Can the Secretary of State please pause the roll-out and fix the multitude of problems we have heard about today before the people of Renfrewshire are made to suffer the consequences?

Ms McVey: If the hon. Gentleman has been calling for some of the changes I have just made, surely he should be celebrating those along with me, because we have listened. It is about getting this right for the citizens, not just opposing for opposing’s sake.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): If the hon. Lady reads the NAO report, she will see that the Government are a real problem with universal credit are completely dismissed out of hand. That is unwise. I powerfully and fiercely supported the £3 billion per annum that was put into universal credit under the coalition, despite putting caveats on the record about some issues with universal credit. Does she agree that, if that £3 billion per annum were still within universal credit, work really would pay, and it would be a substantially successful benefit?

Ms McVey: We have said that the NAO report sadly was out of date and therefore has not taken into account all the changes that have been made. That is unfortunate, because it means that the report is not a true reflection of what is happening. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman was not here for the statement, but if he reads it in Hansard tomorrow, he will have his answers on how well the system is working.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): On a point of order now—normally it would come after statements—but as it relates to this, I will.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Secretary of State like to respond?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I would. If the hon. Lady read and were, supposedly, at the judgment—[Interruption.] I am giving her a get-out clause. On many of the points, the Government
won. They were questioned on how moving area had impacted on people with the severe disability premium. It was not about the fundamental change that I have made to help half a million disabled people by giving transitional protection to people with the severe disability premium, which is different.

Debbie Abrahams: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There were two judgments. The one that I just referenced, about severely disabled people transitioning on to universal credit, was upheld, and the Secretary of State needs to recognise that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will leave it at that, because it has certainly been put on the record and heard. I want to move on to the ministerial statement.

EU Settlement Scheme

12.48 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the new settlement scheme for resident EU citizens and their family members.

Securing the rights of citizens has been our priority in negotiations with the European Union. We have delivered on this commitment and reached an agreement with the EU, which was published in March as a draft legal text. This guarantees the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living in the EU. Under this agreement, EU citizens living in the UK, along with their family members, will be able to stay and continue their lives here, with the same access to work, study, benefits and public services that they enjoy now. Close family members living overseas will be able to join them here in future.

EU citizens make a huge contribution to our economy and to our way of life. They are our friends, our family and our colleagues, and we want them to stay. I am therefore delighted to be publishing today further details about the EU settlement scheme. This will provide the basis for EU citizens resident here, and their family members, to obtain their new UK immigration status, consistent with the draft withdrawal agreement. I will place in the Library of the House a statement of intent setting out in detail how the scheme will work, and how simple and straightforward it will be. The document includes a draft of the immigration rules for the scheme.

We will engage with our stakeholders on the details set out in the statement of intent. These include the user groups that we have established to help us develop the scheme, involving EU citizens’ representatives, embassies, employers and others. We look forward to hearing their views, and will make improvements where we can.

It will be straightforward for EU citizens residing in the UK to obtain status. If they have lived here continuously for five years, they will be eligible for settled status. Those who have lived here for less than five years will generally be granted pre-settled status and be able to apply for settled status once they reach the five-year point. Applicants will not need to show that they meet other detailed requirements of current free movement rules. This means, for example, that stay-at-home parents, retired people and students can all be eligible.

Irish citizens enjoy a right of residence in the UK that is not reliant on our membership of the EU. The Government are committed to protecting these rights, and are working closely with Ireland to maintain these bilateral arrangements for our respective citizens. Irish citizens will not need to apply for status under the scheme, but may elect to do so if they wish. Their family members who are not Irish citizens or British citizens will be able to obtain status under the scheme without the Irish citizen doing so.

Negotiations on similar agreements on citizens’ rights with the non-EU European economic area states and Switzerland are progressing. While the details of those agreements are being finalised, the statement of intent confirms that we intend that the settlement scheme will be open to other EEA citizens and Swiss citizens, and their family members, on a similar basis as for EU citizens.
The scheme set out in the statement of intent will deliver on our commitments to a straightforward process. We are designing the online application form so that it is short, simple and user-friendly. It will be accessible by computer, tablet or smartphone. Assistance will be available for those who need it to complete the online application process. The views of the user groups on the support that may be needed by vulnerable groups will help to ensure that we make the right additional provision for them, through the involvement of community groups and others.

There will be three core criteria that people will need to meet to be granted status under the EU settlement scheme: proving their identity, showing that they are resident in the UK, and declaring whether they have criminal convictions. First, applicants will need to prove their identity and nationality. For those who wish to complete the application entirely online, there will be an app that will allow EU citizens to confirm the relevant details remotely either using their own mobile phone or tablet, or at a location established for them to use the app or be helped to do so. Alternatively, they can send us their identity document by post, and a dedicated team will check this and return it to them as soon as possible.

Secondly we will establish that the applicant is resident in the UK and, where appropriate, their family relationship to an eligible EU citizen. Where possible, the application process will help the applicant to establish their continuous residence here, and whether it amounts to the five years generally required for settled status, on an automated basis using employment and benefit records. This will keep any documentary evidence the applicant is required to provide to a minimum. We recognise that some applicants may lack such evidence in their own name for various reasons, and we will work flexibly with applicants to help them evidence their continuous residence in the UK by the best means available to them.

Thirdly, we will check that the applicant is not a serious or persistent criminal and does not pose a security threat. It is right that we do what is needed to protect everyone who lives in the UK, but we are not concerned with minor offences, and these provisions will not affect the overwhelming majority of EU citizens and their family members.

Throughout the process, we will be looking to grant applications, not for reasons to refuse them, and caseworkers will be able to exercise discretion in favour of the applicant, where appropriate, to minimise administrative burdens. A range of user-friendly guidance and support, including a customer contact centre, will be in place to help applicants through the process.

Subject to parliamentary consideration of changes to the fees regulations, applications will cost £65, with a reduced fee of £32.50 for children under 16. There will be no fee for children in care. The process will be particularly straightforward for those who already hold a valid permanent residence or indefinite leave to remain document, which they will be able to swap for settled status free of charge. Those granted pre-settled status will be able to apply for settled status without paying a further fee.

EU citizens and their family members do not need to do anything immediately. There will be no change to their current rights until the end of the post-exit implementation period on 31 December 2020. The deadline for applications under the scheme, for those resident here by the end of 2020, will be 30 June 2021.

We plan to start opening the settlement scheme later this year. I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge in successfully processing what may exceed 3.5 million applications, but the Home Office already issues about 7 million passports and 3 million visas each year, so processing applications on the scale required is not new to us. As is now standard for the launch of new Government services, there will be a private beta phase from the summer to enable us to test the system and processes, followed by a phased roll-out from late 2018, so we can test them at scale and ensure that they work effectively. The scheme will be open fully by 30 March 2019.

The statement of intent I have published today marks an important point in our preparations for the EU settlement scheme, which will enable EU citizens and their family members to continue living here in much the same way as they do now. We have engaged with EU citizens at every stage of the development process, and will continue to do so. We will also continue to expand our communications to ensure that EU citizens are aware of the scheme and how it will operate, and to ensure that they are reassured that they will have plenty of time in which to apply for their new UK immigration status. The EU settlement scheme will provide a straightforward way of enabling those who have made their lives in the UK to stay here. We want them to do so. I commend this statement to the House.

12.57 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. We, too, value the contribution of EU citizens as our friends, neighbours and colleagues. Their rights must be protected after Brexit. They have already waited two years from the Brexit vote to be given some assurance and guidance on their status in the UK. From speaking to EU citizens, I know that the stress and anxiety of not knowing if they will be allowed to remain and of not being able to start the process have been significant. There has been uncertainty for UK citizens in Europe as well. The Home Secretary criticised the EU27, but we were previously told this matter is for the future relationship. Which is it?

I have a number of questions for the Minister. First, may we have more details on the criteria for settled status? How will the rights of other EEA and Swiss citizens be enforced? On the criminal checks, what exactly will be the threshold, and how far back will offences be considered relevant? As we have seen with highly skilled migrants, the Government have been picking up on very minor tax errors to refuse applications. Will she confirm that this practice will stop, and that it will not apply to EU citizens? Which court will adjudicate when, inevitably, incorrect decisions are made in the processing of applications or when legal challenges are made to those decisions, and is that acceptable to the EU? For Irish citizens, the mixed messaging is concerning. They do not “have” to apply, but they could. Will the Minister clarify that?

My second point concerns how vulnerable people will be reached and protected. The Migration Observatory has identified a number of groups who may fall through
the cracks of a settled status system, especially people who are older or disabled, and those with language barriers. What plans does the Minister have to identify and protect victims of domestic abuse who rely on their partner for status? We heard at the last Home Office questions that the UK Government had made contact with only two libraries in Scotland. Does the Minister have any advance on that number?

The Minister said that the scheme will be accessible by computer, tablet or smartphone, yet we heard this morning that it is still not working on iPhones. Will that be fixed, and will the system work on all tablets and computers? She said that locations will be established for people to use the app or be helped to do so. How many locations will there be, and what will be their geographical spread?

Thirdly, can the Department handle the demands of registering 3 million people? The Home Office has a 10% error rate in immigration status checks. Is the Minister confident that the system being introduced will be robust and efficient enough to deal with those applications, without it crashing or large numbers of incorrect decisions being made in the process? The Home Affairs Committee has outlined serious concerns that Brexit will drain resources from an already failing system. Are new staff being recruited from outside the Department or are they being reassigned? How long will they take to train, and how much experience will they have to deal with complex cases?

The Minister said that a dedicated customer contact centre will help people through the process. Has that centre been set up, and will it be staffed by Home Office or outsourced staff? Will information be passed to immigration enforcement if somebody discloses that they do not have the right to be in the UK legally? After Windrush and the 100 letters sent in error to EU citizens last year, many people are understandably nervous about coming forward, especially if they are vulnerable and/or afraid that they will not meet the criteria. Telling them that Home Office staff can exercise discretion will be of little comfort.

Fourthly, will the Minister commit to rolling back the hostile environment, so that another 3 million people are not subject to such unjustified and punitive policies? In the practical application of an ID scheme for upwards of 3 million residents of this country, how is it possible for authorities to insist on the production of ID by a minority of the population? Surely that will lead inevitably to a requirement for all citizens to carry ID. Finally, the Minister said that she will publish the draft immigration rules for the scheme. Should we still expect an immigration White Paper before the summer, and if so, what will be its scope? When will we get the Government’s proposals on the future of migration post-Brexit?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman has raised a large number of points, and alongside him I recognise that post referendum there have been anxieties for EU citizens living in the UK. That is why we are bringing forward details of the settled status scheme. We want to continue our work with—among others—the 3 million group, to allay those fears. It is crucial to me and the entire Government that we send the clear message that EU citizens living here are welcome. We recognise the contribution that they make to our communities, and we want them to stay. That is why we have brought forward details of the scheme, and I commend to the hon. Gentleman the statement of intent that contains many of those details.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific points about vulnerable people, and he was right to do so. We all have anxieties about the most vulnerable in our society, who may well need assistance. UK Visas and Immigration already has assisted digital schemes, and we want to roll those out to community groups and organisations that already work in local areas, so that support is there for people who may find a digital process difficult. He mentioned iPhones and the chip-checker. The digital application will be available on any computer, tablet or smartphone, but the chip-checker is currently available only on Android. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Home Secretary has recently raised that matter with Apple, because of course we would like the chip-checker to work on everything. There will, however, be facilities for those who wish to carry out the process on their smartphone—that process can be saved at every point, and people can then verify their documents in a contact centre or through many of the partner organisations with which we are currently working.

The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned that 3.3 million EU citizens live in the UK. That is why we are moving to a private beta testing mode—we need assurance that the system will work, and then to have a phased roll-out. That is very important. We must also reflect that EU citizens have every right to be here, and they will continue to have those rights until the end of December 2020. For two and half years people will be able to register, and we will encourage them to do so. Importantly, this is the first publication of the scheme, and it gives the statement of intent. We then have a long period before the scheme launches next spring, so that we can be confident we have it right. I do not pretend that this is not a learning process; this is the largest exercise on this scale, and we are determined to listen to our partner organisations, and to citizens groups, to ensure that we make this a success for those EU citizens, who are so important to us.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend—I think it is generous, and indeed it is. It is worth reflecting that within the criteria she laid out, we will now begin the process of ensuring that we do not have people in the UK with criminal records that could affect British citizens, which we have had to put up with for some time under European Union rules. As someone whose sister has lived and worked for pretty much all her life in Italy, can I ask whether the Minister is aware that Guy Verhofstadt at the European Parliament recently chastised other countries for failing to make the same kinds of arrangements, and with the necessary pace of change, alongside the changes that we have brought forward?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about criminal record checks, and all applicants aged 10 or over will be checked against the UK’s national police database and watch lists. Applicants over 18 will be asked about their criminal history in the UK, and indeed overseas. My right hon. Friend has raised a significant point: this is an important, clear offer to EU citizens, which sets out the process that we
wish them to go through over the next few years. The Home Secretary has made the point that it is important that UK citizens who live in other EU states should have the same confidence, and we will continue to work with the EU and other member states to reinforce that message. I accept that 1 million British citizens live in the EU, compared with the 3.3 million for whom we have responsibility to see through the registration process in this country. Nevertheless, 1 million is still a significant number, and I will continue, in engagement with our European neighbours, to reinforce that point.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance notice of her statement. When witnesses from the 3 million group, which represents the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK, and witnesses from Irish in Britain, gave evidence recently to the Exiting the European Union Committee, they said that the Windrush scandal had dented their confidence in the Home Office, and raised anxiety about their new status. Those of us who sit on the Joint Committee on Human Rights and have had a chance to see some of the Home Office files on the Windrush generation have very real concerns about process in the Home Office. Many of us will have been approached by constituents—I was approached by a constituent at a social event last Friday night who wished to express concern about his status as an EU citizen. Does the Minister agree that the absolute principle should be that no EU citizen living in the UK should suffer as a result of the Brexit outcome, in which of course they had no vote? Will she consider waiving the registration fee, as the Scottish Government are going to do for public sector workers and have suggested the British Government should do across the board?

There are potentially significant numbers of people who could fall through the cracks. If just 5% of the estimated 3.3 million EU citizens living in the UK do not register by the deadline, there will be a population of nearly 200,000 left without status. Will the Minister tell us what will happen to EU citizens who do not apply in time?

What conversations has the Minister had with the Scottish Government about the detail of the scheme and how it is to be implemented? The Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for external affairs in the Scottish Government, Fiona Hyslop, and the Welsh Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Finance have written to the Home Office stating it would be unacceptable for more burdens as a result of the scheme to be placed on local authorities without first speaking to the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Will she confirm that that letter, unlike recent missives from the Scottish Government, will be replied to and that there will be proper liaison with the devolved Administrations in this respect?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. We have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be fully engaged in the process. We have held separate sessions with the devolved Administrations about the design of the settlement scheme and they are also involved in regular conversations with local authorities about communications with EU citizens across the country.

The hon. and learned Lady rightly raises the concerns of her constituents. I am sure that every Member will have had constituents come to their surgeries to talk about not simply the process but status after we leave the EU—I know that I have. It is really important that we all reiterate the Prime Minister’s message, which is that we want them to stay. They have contributed a great deal to our country and we wish them to continue to do so.

On fees, we have set out very clearly that the agreement reached with the EU allows a fee up to the cost of an equivalent document for UK nationals. The fee of £65 to apply for status under the settlement scheme is in line with the current cost of obtaining a permanent residence document. To charge a lower fee than the current fee EU citizens are charged for permanent residency would of course disadvantage those who have already paid that fee.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement, which will allow EU citizens to apply for settled status in the easiest way possible. May I suggest that the Home Office consults with community groups, such as Cheltenham’s Polish Tara, to ensure that when the scheme is rolled out it is as user friendly as possible?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend, who is right to emphasise the need for the scheme to be as user friendly as possible and the importance of consultation. We are already undertaking extensive communications work with various communities across the UK and will continue to do so. We recognise the importance of encouraging EU citizens living here to register in a timely manner before the deadline, and of ensuring they understand that we are introducing a streamlined process and seeking to make it as easy as possible.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Immigration Minister for these further details today, which the Home Affairs Committee asked for and looks forward to scrutinising in more detail. Guy Verhofstadt, before the Committee yesterday, urged other European countries to do more to provide more information about the arrangements.

On the status of children whose parents may not register them, or who may be in care and may reach June 2021 without being registered, can the Minister say whether this means that after that date they will not be lawfully resident here? Does she worry that that will mean they have lost legal rights? What action is she taking to prevent children who have grown up here and lived here for many years losing their legal rights?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady raises some important points, in particular about children. She referenced children in the care system. As I set out in my statement, there will be no fee for them. Local authorities clearly have a significant responsibility to ensure that children in the care system are registered in a timely manner. We will have a proportionate response to those who have not registered before the end of June 2021. We will be working extremely hard to ensure that as many are registered as possible. For those who are here lawfully and have been resident for the required five-year period,
we have to ensure that our response takes on board the comments of all people to make sure that no child is disadvantaged.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Minister will know that proportionately my constituency has more eastern European immigrants than any other in the country, so I welcome the scheme and the phased roll-out, which I hope means we can get it right. As a result of that high level of immigration, I have had a number of visits from European ambassadors. Can she reassure me that she will work with ambassadors and embassies, so that we provide information to communities through as many avenues as possible and get this right?

**Caroline Nokes**: Since coming into this role, I have had the opportunity to engage with a range of ambassadors from across the EU. I will certainly continue to do so. I am very conscious that a significant part of this is about communications. We have already started our communications plan, but that will ramp up significantly over the course of the next few months. It is crucial that EU communities, wherever they live in the country, have the opportunity to know what the scheme is about and to understand it. Today, I have published an op-ed piece in a Polish newspaper. There will continue to be significant engagement with foreign newspapers.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I thank officials from the Home Office and the Department for Exiting the European Union for briefing members of the Exiting the European Union Committee last week on how the arrangements were being developed. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s offer of settled status will apply to the 3 million-plus EU citizens in all circumstances? If, heaven forbid, no deal were reached, will those citizens who have already been granted settled status, under the roll-out timetable that the Minister has reported to the House today, keep it? Will the Government keep the scheme open to all the rest who have not yet applied, so they can remain in the United Kingdom even if there were no deal?

**Caroline Nokes**: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I commend the work of the many Select Committees who have sought over the past six months to summon me before them, including his own. We are not anticipating failure. That is an important part of this: we have confidence that there will be a deal. We have reached an agreement with the EU guaranteeing the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living in the EU, and we do not expect that issue to be reopened. I take very seriously the commitment we have made to those EU citizens and I regard that as absolutely of prime importance.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I have been very frustrated about some of the mischief from some parts, which has caused concern for my constituents who are affected. I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, but will she set out for the House what discussions are being had with the European Union about the rights of British citizens living in the EU?

**Caroline Nokes**: I can always rely on my hon. Friend to ensure there is never any mischief from Corby. This is absolutely crucial. We have set out, both in previous announcements and commitments and today in our statement of intent, what we are seeking to do for EU citizens living here. I would like to reassure him that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I, when engaging with officials, leaders or ambassadors across the EU, are reiterating the point time and again about how important it is that UK citizens living in EU member states are extended the same rights and have it made clear to them how they should secure them.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister provide clarity on EU citizens who are married to UK citizens, but who currently may not be resident in the UK? I have a number of constituents whose husbands or wives work abroad and the residency test is not always met. Will they have to apply through a new system to have residency at a future date if they are married to a British citizen?

**Caroline Nokes**: We are very conscious, where there are durable relationships of the type the right hon. Gentleman describes, that it is important that that is clearly affirmed for them. We have set out in detail in the rule book how we are going to address those different situations, including where UK citizens are married to EU citizens who may be living abroad and where EU citizens living here may have non-EEA partners or spouses. They will have an extension of the rights set out in the withdrawal agreement and the statements we have previously made. We will, of course, be providing further detail in due course.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): EU citizens in my constituency would be forgiven for thinking, if they had listened to Opposition Front Benchers, that this process is so complicated that they would be required to recite the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which we know that only the Solicitor General can do. On that basis, and to reassure them, will my right hon. Friend confirm that all EU citizens have to do is prove their identity and residence and declare that there are no criminal convictions? When she does that, will she welcome all those EU citizens in my constituency to do just that, because we want them to stay?

**Caroline Nokes**: The EU citizens living in Bexhill and Battle are very important to us, as are all citizens currently living here as well as those who will arrive during the implementation period. My hon. Friend is right: as I have set out, EU citizens will be asked to demonstrate their identity and residency and to declare any criminality. I got rather anxious that this might provoke the Solicitor General into reciting the entire withdrawal agreement, but I am somewhat relieved that he does not appear to want to do so.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. The agri-food sector in my constituency is very important. Workers from the EU make up large proportions of the workforce in Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods, to give just two examples. She has outlined how the scheme will work for those who have lived here for five years, but for those who have lived here for under five years, and in special circumstances, she will ensure that in Northern Ireland—as indeed in all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—we have enough staff to help applicants to fill
in the applications with the necessary details and facts? Also, with a 12.5% shortfall of workers to harvest crops, will there be a seasonal scheme that helps them?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman returns to a common theme of seasonal agricultural workers and indeed, the importance of EU citizens working in many parts of the UK who come here on a seasonal basis and may well not have been here for the required five years. As I set out in my statement, EU citizens who have been here for less than the five-year period will be able to apply for pre-settled status. Once they have accrued the five years, they will be able to apply for settled status, but there will be no additional cost. He makes an important point about those who might find the process difficult. We are determined not only to make it as simple and streamlined as possible, but to put in place contact centres to provide the required assistance to people who need it.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement, which will give clarity, reassurance and peace of mind to my constituents and their friends who are affected. I also reiterate the point that some colleagues have made: we need to push for a reciprocal agreement, so that UK citizens living in the EU also get the benefit of this announcement.

Caroline Nokes: The message from the House this afternoon is very clear. We have made significant progress in publishing the scheme and are determined to have a process that is up and running and has been through private beta testing very shortly. It is incumbent on our EU friends and neighbours to make sure that they do the same for British citizens who are living in other EU states.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), asked a number of questions. I was carefully ticking them off and I am not sure that the Minister, whose statement I welcome, clearly answered them. I will drill down on one—the criteria. The European citizens in my constituency say that they may have to move between European countries and here when they have family obligations. Some may not have worked or have ever claimed benefits. She mentioned flexibility, but I know that there will be citizens in my constituency right now who will unfortunately not feel reassured and would like to know more about the detail of how those criteria will be assessed, so that they are consistent with the principles of respect for family life.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for the question. We are determined to make sure that a whole range of evidence is clearly set out in the statement of intent for those who may not have worked—for those who have been here for the required period but cannot evidence it through Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs or Department for Work and Pensions records. That includes a wide range of evidence, such as mortgage statements, tenancy agreements and utility bills. We will certainly be encouraging case workers to be flexible and understanding and appreciate that some individuals may not have those documents in their own name, but in a partner’s name, and evidence of a durable relationship will suffice.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement and particularly its emphasis, because it is vital that we continue to say how welcome EU citizens are in the UK and how valued they are for their contribution to our country. Will she say more to reassure UK citizens living in EU countries about the reciprocal arrangements, because UK citizens—my constituents—tell me that they are concerned about that as well?

Caroline Nokes: In discussions with the EU, ambassadors and heads of member states, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is reinforcing that message at every point. There has been significant investment in time and resources to make sure that we have a scheme and a process that will work. We need our European friends and neighbours to reciprocate.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): There was plenty to welcome in this statement, but the Minister ducked the fundamental question about what happens to the tens, if not hundreds of thousands who will inevitably miss the cut-off date. What will their status be and what did she mean when she referred to a proportionate response?

Caroline Nokes: We are absolutely determined to work to make sure that as many EU citizens as possible are registered ahead of the deadline, but we will give a reasonable period in which to apply. For those who miss the deadline and have a good reason for doing so, we will of course have a response that is both pragmatic and takes into account individual circumstances, should people have been, for whatever reason—whether through ill health or mental illness—prevented from applying. We will further discuss these issues with stakeholders over coming weeks to make sure that we get it right.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm how somebody who has obtained settled status will be able to evidence that if they are asked to do so in future by a landlord or employer? If that involves a document or a card, will that document last forever, or will they have to renew it after a certain point?

Caroline Nokes: Individuals will receive a digital status, which they will be able to provide to employers and landlords through the online digital service. We already have evidence of this working through our digital right-to-work checks, which were introduced earlier this year.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Over 20% of my constituents are EU citizens, and despite the warm words, about two thirds have reported negative experiences linked to their nationalities since the referendum. A local dentist I met this week said that the day after the referendum, a patient said that he and his nurse would be sent back where they came from—she is Lithuanian and he is a British citizen of Kurdish descent. I want to ask a very specific question. Irish and Polish citizens have rights that predate our membership of the European Union under legislation that is no longer compatible with immigration legislation. Will that be reviewed so that those rights are preserved?

Caroline Nokes: We have been very clear that in the case of Irish citizens, who have a relationship with us that dates way back to the 1920s, we are absolutely upholding those rights. The hon. Gentleman mentions
those awful incidents where EU citizens were negatively impacted by the outcome of the referendum, and they encountered the sort of incident that he describes. We are seeking to send a very clear message from this Government, and from UK society, that we recognise the contribution that EU citizens make to this country. We want them to stay. This sets out very clearly their rights and how those who have been here for five years will immediately be eligible for settled status. Those who have been here for less than five years will be able to apply for pre-settled status and accrue the five years. We are pleased to make this really important step, because we wish to give a significant message of reassurance to those people who have been living and contributing here for many years.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement. She is absolutely right. Many of my constituents who are EU nationals have brought their concerns to my surgery.

I have a very simple question. Do settled status and pre-settled status give EU citizens the same right to use the national health service as UK nationals?

Caroline Nokes: Yes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister say a little more about the situation of children? I know that parents are concerned about it. Children will not be able to provide utility bills or employment records, and better-off parents will probably not have received any benefits for them. What other evidence would the Government find acceptable to demonstrate that a child has the right to settled status, and where will they look for that evidence?

Caroline Nokes: Obviously there will be a significant link between many children and their parents’ status, but we will accept evidence from educational institutions, and from healthcare professionals who have encountered people during their stay. Similarly, if adults cannot provide records from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, evidence of university or college attendance will suffice.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): A significant number of my constituents are EU nationals. What provision is there for those who need to take a break in their residency to go and look after a relative who is ill? How will that affect their settled status?

Caroline Nokes: There is provision in the rules for people to leave the country for up to six months in any 12-month period. However, in cases of illness or, perhaps, pregnancy, when people choose to return to a different country—perhaps to have a baby—we will certainly accommodate such absences, with a view to granting rather than refusing, and doing so in a sympathetic and flexible manner.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Are there any posts that EU citizens in the UK will have to give up in April next year? I am thinking of, for instance, local councillors.

Caroline Nokes: It is not the intention that any EU citizen who benefits from either a service or a post will have to give that up. What we are saying to EU citizens is “We wish you to stay here, and to continue to live as you do now.”

BILL PRESENTED

VOYEURISM (OFFENCES) (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary David Gauke, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Penny Mordaunt, Secretary Matt Hancock, the Attorney General, Andrea Leadsom, Rory Stewart, Lucy Frazer and Edward Argar, presented a Bill to make certain acts of voyeurism an offence, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 25 June, and to be printed (Bill 25) with explanatory notes (Bill 25-EN).
Backbench Business

Refugee Family Reunion

1.32 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House notes that 18 to 24 June is Refugee Week; further notes that many families throughout the world have been torn apart by war and persecution; welcomes the fact that the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill was given its Second Reading without opposition on 16 March 2018; and calls on the Government to support the provisions of that Bill.

It is a great privilege and pleasure to open the debate. I thank its co-sponsors, the hon. Member for Streatham and Urmston (Kate Green), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). Refugee Week is an important time at which to consider these issues and, indeed, the contribution that refugees make to societies around the world, although many left their own lands in very difficult circumstances. Many, of course, did not want to leave, and many now wish to return home but, sadly, will not realise that dream.

Last night, an event was held at Speaker’s House to mark Refugee Week. Indeed, yesterday was World Refugee Day. It was a fantastic event. The National Theatre, in co-operation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, organised a number of sketches and another performances. The aim was to convey in a more engaging manner, and sometimes with humour, the feelings of refugees and the difficulties that they experience, and the choice that they have had to make to flee their homelands. Celebrities were present, including the actors David Morrissey, Cate Blanchett and Colin Firth—“Colin”, as he is now known to Nikita Harkin from my office, as she had to accompany him to Speaker’s House. It was great to see that people who were probably some of the most fortunate in our global village had the empathy, the social responsibility and the simple concern to give of their time to press the issues of refugees, in particular as UNHCR special ambassadors.

A great point was made by the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), whom Members may well know better as Mr Speaker himself. He observed that the presence of celebrities was invigorating, but also reminded people that there was a “we” as well as a “me” when it came to the issue of refugees in our world. Such events are important, as are debates like this. I know that this debate will be watched by not just many people who work with refugees, but refugees themselves who are looking for hope and some changes, and perhaps some warm words from the Government, which I am sure will come at some stage.

An unprecedented number of people—68.5 million—have been forced to flee from their homes, and 22.5 million of them have become refugees. Amazingly, 50% of those 22.5 million are under the age of 18. I have become more aware of this subject as a result of my private Member’s Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which had its Second Reading on 16 March. The more one delves into the subject, the more one finds out, although I do not think that anyone—even a refugee—can really be an expert, because everyone has a different story.

The refugees who may be watching the debate should know that they are definitely not alone, and I know that from the organisations that worked on my Bill with me. Jon Featonyby of the Red Cross has been fantastic. I am also grateful to James Bulman and Laura Padoan of the UNHCR, Seb Klier of the Refugee Council, Lucy Wake of Amnesty International, and Sam Nadel of Oxfam.

I have mentioned those people as individuals, and also to gain further recognition for their groups. The Red Cross, the UNHCR, the Refugee Council, Amnesty and Oxfam are not just abstract bodies; they are bodies that contain dedicated people who are working very hard to make the lives of others better. I consider that laudable. I wish that I had the abilities, and perhaps the time and the inclination, to do the same. Sometimes in life one thinks to oneself, “There are definitely people who are doing better things with their lives than I am with mine.”

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I echo the hon. Gentleman’s praise for the people who are making that contribution, but does he recognise that throughout the country, in civil society, a huge body of people are making a contribution in every one of our towns and cities? He will know, I think, that Sheffield was the country’s first city of sanctuary, making the positive statement that we welcome those who flee persecution and war. Does he agree that that sanctuary movement, which has now been taken up by many other towns, can make a very positive statement to refugees?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is fantastic, and Sheffield can be very proud. Becoming the first city of sanctuary is one of the proudest badges that any city can wear, and it is something for all other towns and cities to emulate. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the contribution is not made just by organisations, as is clear when we drill down further in society. I think that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who was present for my Bill’s Second Reading on 16 March, is very pleased by my mentions of her city. The tabloid newspapers often tell us that there is overcrowding in the south-east, or a lack of welcome for refugees, but, in fact the people of Canterbury have been very welcoming, which is a great credit to them. However, I am sure that they are not alone. The hon. Gentleman has made a great point about the city of Sheffield. Many people—in charity shops, for instance—are doing whatever they can to make a better life for the refugees who come to the United Kingdom, and that is very welcome.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that organisations such as Bath Welcomes Refugees in my constituency are not only supporting refugees, but raising their profile and our awareness of the terrible fate that many face in countries across the world, and making us more sympathetic to their cause?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes, and the more we are aware of and we see the big tide of support for refugees, the quieter the more mean-minded voices become. I think it was the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) who mentioned in a previous debate that when we drill down with the public—and engage with and talk to them about refugees, and are not afraid of the arguments—we see that, despite what
some in the media would like to say, the public do come on board, and that in fact they are doing that anyway. We need to catch up in our public discourse and debate with what members of the public are doing in Sheffield, in Canterbury, in charity shops in Stornoway, Orkney, Shetland, Land’s End or wherever, or in Ireland and other countries. People are doing this everywhere, and people do have an understanding of, and sympathy towards, refugees.

When I was dealing with my private Member’s Bill, it became clear to me that it gave hope to people, even when it had completed just its first stage in Parliament. That brought home to me the responsibility I had. First, I had to deliver the bad news that we were only through the first stage, because there are many stages for Bills to go through, and that it therefore might not become law. We must still wait for a money resolution. I am sure that the Home Office will be generous and make sure we do have that money resolution, but we must then get the Bill through Committee and guide it through the Lords. There are therefore other steps to take, and in addition to that—this is probably strange for Opposition Members to think about—we do need parliamentary stability, because if we have another election in the next wee while, that private Member’s Bill will be gone, which will affect refugees who are looking for hope.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Of course there are possible solutions to that, and one of them might come now.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for giving way, in part because it gives me an opportunity to practise my pronunciation of his constituency.

Will the hon. Gentleman join me in redoubling efforts to encourage the Minister to commit today to urging her colleagues to bring forward that money resolution? After all, if the Government do not like the Bill, they can always vote it down at a later stage, but to block it due to the lack of a money resolution, particularly in Refugee Week, would feel very frustrating.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady’s pronunciation of my constituency was excellent. Some Members might feel they are a bit of a refugee in this Parliament when trying to say the name of my constituency, or indeed they might think I am the refugee. Either way, the hon. Lady’s point is absolutely on the money.

I hope that the Home Office will take this point on board. I have had some discussions with Government Whips about the money resolution, and the lights so far have been going green. We have yet to move on to the Home Office itself, but that is coming, and I am hoping for further green lights.

In 2012, legal aid was taken away from refugees, but that did not happen in Scotland. Moreover, if Scotland were independent, I am sure we would be in line with other European countries, and I hope that the UK as it is at the moment ensures that child refugees have the same rights as adult refugees. That is what my private Member’s Bill tries to do. Some Members have expressed a strong concern about children being sent ahead as anchors, but that does not stack up at all, given the rights that adult refugees have anyway and the fact that that does not happen in other European countries. Anyway, who uses members of their family as bargaining chips?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. He is right to draw attention to children’s rights. Does he agree that we have an absolute obligation to allow children to be reunited and to bring in their parents and family members because we have signed and ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child, which states:

“States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.”

How can it be in the best interests of a child for them not to be able to bring their parents and other family members to live with them?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is absolutely correct; I could not have put it better myself. I thank the hon. Lady, who is co-sponsoring this debate, for that invaluable intervention pointing out our international obligations. I agree that it is in the best interests of children to be with their parents, and I must make a remark about the utter revulsion and disgust many of us feel about what is happening in the United States of America, with migrant children being taken from their parents. I am at a loss as to whether that is stupidity or evil—I cannot decide which, but it is certainly not a good situation. I think that all of us know that when children are being ripped from their parents in such a way, we do not need quotations. The American Administration have used biblical quotations, but we all know in our hearts that that is wrong. We do not need to quote and counter-quote, and make arguments about this. If those in the Administration of the United States of America do not know in their hearts that there is something very wrong with that, there is something wrong with their moral compass, and I do hope that that all changes.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I am sure everybody in the Chamber thinks what has been happening in the US is abhorrent. Would not the best reaction from this Government be to set an example on family reunification, and to take away the threat and anxiety of young people, in particular, who fear being sent out of the country when they approach their 18th birthday? If I was not in the Chamber, I would be at the weekly refugee lunch that Refugees Welcome puts on in Hammersmith. Voluntary organisations are doing a fantastic job, as the hon. Gentleman says, but we need leadership from the Government.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Gentleman for missing his lunch to be here. He makes a fantastic point about the fear that people feel. When we speak to and get to know refugees, what we learn can seem almost mundane, given the big picture we are trying to sort out legally, but when we drill down to the personal level, we see that people are not sleeping at night due to fear and worry. Their fear might not even be for themselves; it might, as I know from one case, be fear for a sister in a refugee camp in Sudan. The fear is that the sister will
try to do what her brother did and go through the Sahara with people traffickers, when he saw unspeakable things happening to women. The fear is of the sister being so desperate in the refugee camp that she will jump from that frying pan into a very horrible fire.

I have talked about my private Member’s Bill and what an independent Scotland would do, but I hope the Government will take these matters forward in an immigration Bill. It would be to their great credit if they did, and that could mean that my private Member’s Bill would be seen as redundant in the next few months. I know that an immigration Bill is coming. [Interruption.] I see a smile from the Minister. Perhaps it is a rueful smile, but we might see some progress in that Bill. I am sure that the Minister and many members of the Government agree. Indeed, there is now a new broom at the Home Office—we have seen some fantastic things happening.

I give credit where credit is due: the Financial Times pointed out a week last Monday the difficulty in getting doctors to come in, and by the following Friday that seemed to be resolved, much to the benefit of doctors themselves. Everybody in the health service was a winner, and the Government are getting the credit. If we could now also sort out the issue of work visas for crews of fishing boats on the west coast of Scotland, that would be fantastic. Everybody in Scotland wants that to happen; we are just dealing with a person or two in London who does not let it happen, but it is damaging our economy. Interestingly, these migrant workers would not be included in the migration figures, and boats would be back fishing and there would be processing going on. But I digress; that was more of a personal conversation between me and the Minister. Some of my constituents at home will be pleased that I have raised this matter, however, and they will see the link between all these issues.

I know that many Members want to speak, and it was flagged to me that some wanted to intervene—most of them have done so. When working with refugees we become aware of many things, and the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside that I mentioned earlier was very valid: the public are absolutely onside when politicians are courageous enough to make a case, and do not run for the quick populist hit of just talking numbers, but instead start talking about human beings.

I am coming to the end of my remarks, but I want to give the final word to a refugee who recited a poem last night at Speaker’s House. Being from Scotland, and particularly Gaelic Scotland, I know of the poets who have communicated to people in many ways that speech makers and any number of orators cannot. I am thinking back into history of Alasdair mac Mhaighstir, Somhairle Maclean and Iain Lom, who Max Hastings credited as being perhaps the first war journalist ever. Iain Lom was hiding behind a rock at the battle of Inverlochy in 1645 when Alasdair Mac Colla came up and asked what he was doing behind a rock. Iain Lom said, “Well, if I get killed today, who is going to be praising your heroism tomorrow, Alasdair?” There is a great deal to be said for poets generally, but the poet last night absolutely blew my socks off. He was fantastic at communicating his issues among the other refugees I met in Speaker’s House last night. Some of them consider themselves to have been refugees all their lives. I have tried to think of “refugee” as a temporary status before the person becomes a welder—like Yohannes from Canterbury, whom we spoke of on 16 March—a doctor or another productive member of society.

I met a woman from Somalia, although she was a refugee, dreamed of going home. I asked her whether she would maintain her language skills and pass them on to her children and she said she would, which is a good thing. People in Gaelic Scotland—probably also in Wales and, indeed, in England—are pleased when migrants go off to countries such as Australia and New Zealand and maintain their language skills. We in Gaelic Scotland are very pleased when people come back from Nova Scotia, Ceap Breatainn in particular, and have maintained their languages. If we want that as a set of values for ourselves, surely we could allow, enable and help refugees to maintain their culture and language. Wearing my Chair of the International Trade Committee cup, it is important that we have such skills in the UK going forward, so that when those countries become more prosperous and trade with us, we can trade with them using citizens who still have those language skills.

I want to indulge the House awhile with J. J. Bola’s poem from last night because—with the greatest of respect to today’s speakers—he puts into words what it is like to be a refugee much better than any Member here today could and certainly better than I could. He asked me to point out that he was a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the dictatorship has led to 6 million people being killed and many more displaced. I think he said last night that he arrived in the UK at the age of six. I will finish off with his words because they are worth thinking about. He wrote:

“imagine how it feels to be chased out of home. to have your grip ripped. loosened from your fingertips something you so dearly held on to. like a lovers hand that slips when pulled away you are always reaching.

my father would speak of home. Reaching. speaking of familiar faces. girl next door

who would eventually grow up to be my mother. the fruit seller at the market. the lonely man at the top of the road who nobody spoke to. and our house at the bottom of the street lit up by a single flickering lamp

where beyond was only darkness. there they would sit and tell stories

of monsters that lurked and came only at night to catch the children who sat and listened to stories of monsters that lurked.

this is how they lived. each memory buried.

an artefact left to be discovered by archaeologists. the last words on a dying family member’s lips. this was sacred.

not even monsters could taint it.

but there were monsters that came during the day. monsters that tore families apart with their giant hands. and fingers that slept on triggers. the sound of gunshots ripping through the sky became familiar like the tapping of rain fall on a window sill.

monster that would kill and hide behind speeches. suits and ties. monsters that would chase families away forcing them to leave everything behind.

i remember when we first stepped off the plane. everything was foreign. unfamiliar. Uninviting. even the air in my lungs left me short of breath.
we came here to find refuge. They called us refugees so we hid ourselves in their language until we sounded just like them. I changed the way we dressed to look just like them. I made this our home until we lived just like them and began to speak of familiar faces. Girl next door who would grow up to be a mother. Fruit seller at the market. Lonely man at the top of the road. Nobody spoke to. Our house at the bottom of the street lit up by a single flickering lamp to keep away the darkness. There we would sit and watch police that lurked and came only at night to arrest the youths who sat and watched police that lurked and came only at night. This is how we lived. I remember one day I heard them say to me, they come here to take our jobs. they need to go back to where they came from. Not knowing that I was one of the ones who came. I told them that a refugee is simply someone who is trying to make a home. So next time you go home, tuck your children in and kiss your families goodnight be glad that the monsters never came for you. in their suits and ties. Never came for you. in the newspapers with the media lies. Never came for you. That you are not despised. And know that deep inside the hearts of each and every one of us we are all always reaching for a place that we can call home."

1:54 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and I pay tribute to his work in this area. It is fitting that the Member for such a constituency, which is beautiful and has wonderful people, is acting and leading the charge in this area, not least because it has been the site of forced emigration in the past.

I welcome this important debate in the middle of Refugee Week. The subject is important all over the world—in Germany, in Italy and in the US—and I welcome President Trump’s decision to change course on the policy of separating children from their families at the border. This issue is also important in my constituency, which has welcomed all kinds people fleeing persecution in other countries. For example, in the 1970s, we welcomed the Ugandan Asians. I pay tribute to how they have made a new life in this country, building amazing businesses, creating an amazing sense of community and integrating into our community. They are amazing people.

Others have come to my constituency more recently. I meet many of them because Kennedy House in Wigston in my constituency is a centre for people seeking asylum and new refugees. I pay tribute to those who volunteer with those people, helping them to integrate into our community and in other practical ways. They often bring some of them to my surgery, so I hear about some of their problems. I also pay tribute to the groups, such as Market Harborough Helping Refugees, that raise funds to help refugees in this country and overseas with practical things such as blankets to help them as they seek a new home.

Today’s debate is about the importance of family reunion but before I turn to that, this being Refugee Week, I hope the House will not mind me briefly mentioning a few things that we could do to improve the lives of refugees. I have three suggestions that have sprung from the work done by the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness, of which I am a member, and from my constituency experiences.

The first thing that the Government should do is clarify the rules on refugees and asylum seekers doing voluntary work in the community. I understand the arguments against allowing asylum seekers to do paid work and the arguments about pull factors, but they should be able to do voluntary work. By doing such work, they can express their strong desire to do something helpful for the community that is hosting them, but they can also integrate and learn English, so it can play an important role in them becoming part of our country. Unfortunately, refugee charities tell me that the rules are not clear and that people have lost out as a result of doing voluntary work, so it would be good to clarify them.

The second thing that we could do to improve the lives of refugees living here is to help more of them to get a decision within our target time. Probably the most common reason that asylum seekers come to my surgery is that the deadline that they were given for a decision on their application has passed and they are wondering what is happening. It is clearly difficult to make decisions on complicated cases involving people who have fled from war zones where public records may have been destroyed or otherwise made unavailable, but, if we could speed up decisions, that would help many people who spend a long time unable to do anything but wait, which is a painful experience for them.

Kate Green: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentions the delays in getting a decision. A group of refugees from Refugee Voice recently visited me in my constituency to make exactly that point. Living with indecision and uncertainty, sometimes for years, puts incredible emotional pressure on people.

Relating that to the hon. Gentleman’s earlier point about access to paid employment, does he agree that, increasingly, decisions are taking a very long time to be made, through no fault of the claimant, and that asylum seekers should be allowed to work after a certain period of delays in decision making mean there is a failure to give them a decision on their status?

Neil O’Brien: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have heard that argument, which is an intriguing one. It would be a big step to do anything that suggested those people would be able to work in this country, so we should be very careful when we think about it. However, I understand the argument that, if people have to wait a very long time, perhaps something about their treatment should change at that point.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I support everything that has just been said. However, there is a real problem with identifying people and it has to be clear. I have been dealing with people who claim to be someone they are not. The danger is that you will get the wrong person and the wrong country. So it is very important to ascertain the facts. That is the reason it takes so long. I agree it should be speeded up, but that is the reason.
Neil O'Brien: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extremely difficult and no one should downplay or minimise the difficulty of the task facing the officials who make these difficult decisions and who are trying to investigate very complicated cases.

My third suggestion for improving the lives of refugees in the UK is to teach them English. When I meet people who have come here as refugees and hear their stories, I am particularly struck by what it is like to arrive in a country where they do not know anyone. It is often a very different culture, and they are navigating quite complicated bureaucracy without speaking any of the language.

I am always amazed and impressed by how quickly some people pick up English, having started with absolutely nothing. I met an amazing Burundian woman the other day at the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness. She talked about her story and spoke in brilliant English, even though only a few short years ago she spoke no English at all. None the less, despite the success of many people in learning English when they come to this country, it can be very isolating and very lonely for those who do not have the language.

The fiscal environment, notwithstanding the welcome investment in the NHS, remains difficult but, working through community and voluntary groups, it need not cost a huge amount to help more people to learn English more quickly. The benefits in creating an integrated society in which more refugees can work and feel that they really belong would be enormous.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar quoted a number of excellent Scottish poets. When I meet refugees, I am often struck by the words of Grace Nichols’s poem “Epilogue”:

“I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old one
a new one has sprung.”

I am always reminded of that poem because it is an incredibly impressive thing to have come to this country with nothing and to have learned a language, which I would struggle to do under ideal conditions. The power of the language to make people feel properly part of this country is very strong.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the way he is making the argument for learning the English language. I come from Gaelic Scotland, and Plaid Cymru Members come from Welsh Wales. Rather than the idea that refugees must learn our language because that is what we speak here and they must fit in, the idea of learning our language to stop them feeling isolated and lonely is commendable. I can get behind that idea, rather than demanding that people speak a language that I do not think is one of the original languages of the British Isles, but that is a minor point.

Nei O’Brien: The hon. Gentleman might say he makes a minor point, but it is an entirely fair one. I have been to some of the pubs in his constituency where other languages are spoken, and I certainly did not feel isolated or lonely—in fact, they were extremely sociable and very pleasant places to visit.

On family reunification, this country has a proud record of welcoming persecuted people from all over the world who have come to this country in fear for their lives. I think back to my childhood in Huddersfield: we had Chilean family friends who came to this country because their kind of politics was no longer welcome in Chile. My childhood in Huddersfield was enriched not only because those people had come here and worked hard as social workers but because they brought culturally interesting things to us. Family Christmases in Huddersfield involved empanadas, as well as the traditional turkey roast.

The resettlement schemes in this country have been a success. I have met people who have gone through those schemes, and they have had a much better experience than many people who have gone through the asylum route. We can learn a lot from the success of some of those schemes.

To summarise the current situation, as the hon. Gentleman has approached it, refugees can bring their children here if they are under the age of 18, but adult children are not included. Children under the age of 18 cannot bring their parents here. There are also powers for leave to be granted outside those rules in exceptional circumstances.

I can see the arguments both for and against changing those rules, and it sounds as if Ministers are thinking about it carefully. The question is whether we should go down the route of changing the rules, or whether we should instead use the exceptional circumstances rules in a more generous, more humane way. By way of analogy, I think of the people who are working on the Windrush generation. We need a high-calibre team with enough time to think properly about processing difficult cases. One way or another, the hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The question is how we solve it.

I am not saying the hon. Gentleman’s idea is necessarily a bad one or the wrong one, but I will rehearse the downsides for a moment because this is a debate. We need to think carefully about whether we would be creating an incentive for young children to be trafficked. He rightly asks: who would use their children as bargaining chips? When people make the argument that the proposed change might lead to more unaccompanied children travelling to the UK irregularly, it is not a criticism of those children’s families, and we do not necessarily know anything about their circumstances. The children might be completely on their own, and it is almost certainly the case that, if they have parents, they will be desperate parents in a warzone who fear for their lives. We need to think about whether the change could lead to children being exploited by unscrupulous people smugglers.

In my own area, I am reminded of the case of Ahmed, a young Afghan boy who, in 2016, saved the lives of some 15 people. He was being smuggled into the UK and he arrived at Leicester Forest East services. He and those 15 people were trapped in an airtight lorry and running out of oxygen, and he had the presence of mind to text a charity, Help Refugees, which had given him a mobile phone. That text saved his life and the lives of those around him. They were much luckier than the 70 people who, just a few months previously, had choked to death at the hands of people smugglers in an airtight lorry in Austria. There are some truly wicked people in the people smuggling racket.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a live debate on these issues, which is why the hon.
Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) tabled his private Member’s Bill in the first place. We can engage in that debate only if the Bill goes into Committee and is given a money resolution. Will the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) join me in gently encouraging his colleagues on the Treasury Bench to do exactly that?

Neil O’Brien: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I am sure Ministers will have heard his important argument about the process.

In general, we must stick to the principle that people should claim asylum in the first safe country they come to. Our policy can definitely affect the secondary movements of people who are fleeing conflict. We see from policy decisions such as Angela Merkel’s that one can affect the flow of people. Whether we think her policy is right or wrong, it has certainly changed the flow of people. The decisions we make on the questions raised by both the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar have the potential to affect the movement of people and we have to think about the secondary effects. None the less, I absolutely agree that they are raising an important point about the families of young people who arrive in the UK.

Today’s debate is important. There are many different things we could do to improve the lives of people who come to this country as refugees or as claimers of asylum. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has raised some ways in which we could do that, although there may be different ways of addressing those issues. Those who come to this country as refugees are often very impressive people. In our history, they have often brought a lot to this country in terms of their achievements, work and cultural contribution. I am proud that people think of this country as a good place that they want to get to. In a sense, we should be flattered by the number of people who want to come here and be part of our community. We should think about how we can welcome them into this country.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It seems to me that, as he said, this argument is cutting through: someone with confirmed refugee status should be able to live with their family. To be clear, for the record, we are talking about people who have their status settled and want to be with their family. I agree with the points that some Members make about clarifying who is who and whether or not they have a right to be here, but we do have a process and once someone has their status confirmed, they should be allowed to be reunited with their family. I will be working with the hon. Gentleman and others to capitalise on this political and public progress, and push the progress of this Bill and a separate similar Bill in the House of Lords. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, whom I know to be a very honourable woman. I have had meetings with her and was pleased to discuss these matters with her. I hope she can commit today at least to bringing forward the money resolution, so that we can get this Bill moving and at least debate this, to the satisfaction of our constituents as well as Members across the House.

It is a difficult and perhaps tense moment to mention the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as we have spent a lot of time on it over the past few months. Indeed, I cannot remember a time when we were not debating it, although it now looks like that period is coming to a close. As part of that Bill, I was glad the Government took on a significant part of the amendment from my friend and colleague Lord Alf Dubs, as well as that proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). She proposed additional changes to maintain the current situation in relation to the obligations we have under our membership of the EU and the Dublin III convention. I am not going to go into detail, but I wish to acknowledge that that is a positive step, although it does not remove the need for the private Members’ Bills to make further progress, as those provisions do not contain all that those Bills contain.
I wish to echo what the hon. Member for Harborough has said about the right to work and tentatively suggest to all colleagues that they should remember that refugees come here with skills and want to work. They do not come here to claim benefits. They want to contribute. Every refugee I have ever met has said, “I want to contribute my skills.” They want to be able to work, but, except with specific permission, they are not allowed to until they have been granted asylum by the Home Office. That would be okay, except that the Home Office target to complete asylum decisions within six months is frequently missed. In my case load, for whatever reason—I am prepared to accept there may be good reasons—that target is, unfortunately, more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. It is often missed by months or even years, which means that skilled people are meanwhile left without opportunities to maintain their skills, support their families and contribute to the national and local economy. This also makes it harder for them to integrate when they are eventually given status. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, they often face restrictions on volunteering. This makes family life harder and makes it particularly difficult for people to get towards the point where they can earn the money they need to reunite their family members and bring their families back together.

Hon. Members may or not be aware that, by contrast, Uganda allows refugees to work immediately, and provides them with land to grow food on and start-up finance to set up their own businesses, if that is what they wish to do. Other countries have also given us useful models. We should at the very least consider a principle of the right to work after six months, which would also encourage the Minister’s Department to end those delays, and the right to volunteer until they can work. I would prefer us to move towards a system where the default setting is the right to work or the right to volunteer, and ideally both. Of course, we need to discuss that and how it would work, but I would like us at least to be considering it as a principle.

There are many other things we can do to improve the way we treat refugees and reunite families, including ending indefinite immigration detention. That is not the subject of this debate, so I am not going to discuss it. We could also restore legal aid, so that refugees can be reunited with their families; prioritise free, high-quality English language teaching; and do more to create safe and legal routes to the UK, with refugee schemes such as the excellent vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. I applaud the Government’s efforts to keep that scheme going and make it as good as it is, but I would like it to be made easier to make in-country or border applications for asylum and resettlement. Keeping people in refugee camps or on the borders at best leaves people in limbo for years and at worst creates a recruiting ground for people traffickers and people who sexually exploit women. We all want to prevent those dangerous journeys—we share that aim—but the way of preventing them is not by making it harder to claim family reunion; it is by increasing safe and legal routes.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, because she is talking about some of the practical steps the Government can take. Children I have visited in the Calais camps—as close as that—have the prima facie right under the Dubs amendment and Dublin III to come here but are simply not being assessed. They will therefore eventually risk their lives under trains or lorries in order to get here. Those are the sorts of issues, along with the funding of English language teaching and the right of asylum seekers to work here, that would make a practical difference and would help this country.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for making those excellent points. He is absolutely right to say that there are children in Calais—other hon. Members have been to see them, too—who appear to have a relative who already has status in this country, and who should be here. Making those safe and legal routes available is very important in order to protect children and adults.

In closing, let me say that the forthcoming immigration Bill may give us scope to support amendments in many of these areas, and I hope it does, but we need to create other opportunities to improve the treatment of those looking for sanctuary in this country and to improve the welcome we offer. I urge Members from across the House to read the report that my all-party group compiled, researched and wrote last year, “Refugees Welcome?”. One recommendation was about the right to work, but others were about the other matters I have mentioned. We can all improve the welcome that we as Members of Parliament give to our own constituents. I have been learning Arabic for the past 18 months to make myself a better MP for Syrian and other middle eastern refugees. I am smiling because it is very slow progress—painfully slow; they are learning English faster than I am learning Arabic—but the idea is to make that welcome as genuine and sincere as possible.

This is about who we are as a country. It is about how we want to be seen in the world. It is about the fact that in our increasingly, heartbreakingly divided world, differences are reinforced more than they are bridged. It is about those countries that live out their values and provide safe haven for those who flee war and persecution. Those are the countries that light up a more hopeful future for us all.

2.20 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this hugely important debate. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and wish to pick up on several of her remarks later. She said very movingly that how we treat this subject reflects who we are as a people and the kind of culture and civilisation that we represent.

As the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) said in his opening remarks, the debate in Britain has been driven perhaps for too long by sensationalist tabloid headlines. There is of course a huge swell of emotion whenever the issues of immigration and refugees are raised, but we have to distinguish between different types of immigration. We have to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees, and we have to recognise that opportunistic traffickers exist—we cannot turn a blind eye to that. It is a complicated picture.

On refugees, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar’s private Member’s Bill is a remarkable thing for a private Member to bring forth. It commanded the support
of many Members from across the House: the hon. Gentleman said that Members from five parties turned up to support his Bill on 16 March. Regrettably, I could not be one of those Members, but it is striking that his Bill has commanded such a wide range of support. The reason it commanded that support is that in Britain, as represented not only by Members in this House but by a wide population—by many, many of our constituents—there is a general feeling that if people are fleeing for their lives or fleeing persecution, Britain will be a welcome home and place of asylum for them.

Britain has a long history of welcoming, in a very generous spirit, people who have fled persecution. We can talk about the Huguenots in the 17th century or Russian Jews fleeing persecution in the 19th century. We can talk about the 20th century, when Jews once again faced a terrible tyranny and sought asylum here in Britain. Over the centuries, many of those people have contributed enormously to British culture, literature, economics and philosophy. All sorts of brilliant ideas have been fostered by extremely talented people who have fled for their lives. There have also been people who have helped in more ordinary situations, such as in the transport sector and the public services. A number of those people have come from families of refugees, or have been refugees themselves. No one denies that.

In the recent past—in the last few years—the British Government have had a good record and a good story to tell. One thing that no one has really talked about so far in this debate is that we are going through an unprecedented period of stress and political turmoil in the world. I have travelled a lot in the middle east and Egypt, and I have seen at first hand the devastation—the complete chaos—to which large areas of that part of the world have been subjected, through war and the lack of stable government. We hailed the Arab spring when it came upon us in 2011, but for many people that spring has turned into a nightmare. We need only look at the situation in Libya. I am one of very few Members of Parliament to have been there, and some of the conditions in which migrants there find themselves is appalling. As I said earlier, we cannot be blind to the fact that there are unscrupulous and wicked people who will exploit the situation.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and highlights the importance of having this debate and getting it right. The pressures we face are not going to get any easier. Whether or not the conflicts come and go—I suspect that they always will—we are going to see, not that far down the track, further pressures from the effects of climate change. That will cause massive movements of people. Whether they would currently be seen as economic migrants or refugees, there will be people unable to remain where they currently are.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point: this phenomenon of migration and the political uncertainty and instability are not just going to go away. In fact, if we look forward, we are probably going to have greater pressures and greater numbers of people coming from sub-Saharan Africa and the middle east.

Bob Stewart: I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene on him. He cites migrants in Libya. I have not been to Libya, so I bow to my hon. Friend's greater authority on the matter, but are those migrants refugees from other parts of Africa or displaced persons from within Libya, or are they economic migrants? It seems to me that they might be a mix of everything.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend—my very good friend—is absolutely right, and that shows how complicated and variegated the problem is. In Libya, there are all three: economic migrants, people from sub-Saharan Africa fleeing real persecution outside Libya, and people who are being mercilessly trafficked for gain. It is a complicated picture and it is not easy to say which is which. In some instances, an individual or family might have two or three different reasons why they should leave their home or why they were forced out of their home. It is not particularly helpful to come to this question with a simple, preconceived notion of what a refugee is, what an economic migrant is or what someone who is being trafficked is, because the real world is a lot more complicated than that. We cannot simply put people, families and children in such neatly defined silos. We have to be much more flexible in our approach.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar stressed how Britain is very welcoming, but he also mentioned the fact that the climate has been hostile in many instances, particularly in respect of tabloid newspapers. I am not someone openly to praise tabloid newspapers in this country—they have many strengths and many weaknesses—but it is easy in this House to pour scorn on what used to be called the popular press. The tabloids respond to the very real concerns of people throughout the country. If I speak to my constituents in Spelthorne, they express extremely generous sentiments towards genuine refugees, but there is also genuine concern that Britain’s hospitality and generosity can be abused, and it can be abused by some of the unscrupulous traffickers we talked about.

I wish to talk a little more about trafficking, because it is a problem that perhaps absorbs too little attention in this House. I was in Libya a year ago, when I was told that an individual needs to pay $1,000 to be transported from Libya to, in the first instance, Italy, which is the most common country of destination for these migrants. It does not take a mathematician to work out that if each person pays $1,000 to be trafficked, or transported, and there are—I was told—up to something like 1,000 migrants a day in the high season, when trafficking is at its peak the business of trafficking is potentially worth around $1 million a day. Such a huge amount of money that is potentially being distributed, or is part of the revenues of this business, attracts all kinds of people. When I was there, people talked about the Sicilian mafia, various eastern European mafiosi and the Russian mafia. Lots and lots of unscrupulous people are involved in this terrible trafficking.

We must look not only at the political instability and the relative disturbances in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, but at the sources of the trafficking. We must clamp down on the criminal activities of these gangs, because they are the people who are driving this trade. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) suggested, this is a problem that will not go away. I assure the House that, if it does not go away, there will be unscrupulous gangs and criminal elements all over this trafficking and this way
of making money. If that is the case, any European Government will have to focus much more closely on stopping the criminality.

When we talk about refugees, we understand the humanitarian concerns of our constituents, but there is another side to this issue. I see the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) shaking his head, but we cannot simply stick our heads in the sand and ignore this terrible trade.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting case. On a wider point of information, I think it was the Swedish academic, Hans Rosling—I might have the name wrong—who pointed out first that the reason why many people go overland is that air transportation is closed to them because of our rules that will send them back again. We have other difficulties and other issues in and among that, so, sometimes, our own policies are actually creating the free market business that he describes of people trafficking at £1,000 a head.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a legitimate point, but this trafficking has not come from British policy. I do not think that people who are trafficking Nigerians from the western coast of Libya into Italy, as the first port, are doing so because of the policies of the British Government. I do not really see a direct link. All I am trying to suggest is that there is a far a wider range of problems on which this issue touches.

Mr Carmichael: I am in broad agreement with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, but there is another aspect on which he has not touched. He said earlier, I think, that people traffickers lead this trade. I suggest to him gently that, in fact, they are the product of it. One reason why they are a product of it is that they are filling a vacuum because there are no proper safe and legal routes. If we put in safe and legal routes, along with proper action on an international basis, we will be part of the way to excising the cancer of the people traffickers.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman is right that, clearly, criminals are not, in the first instance, driving this issue. There are many social, political and economic reasons for this phenomenon but, certainly in the parts of Libya that I saw and in the migrant camps in Sicily where I talked to a few people who were unlucky enough to be trafficked, a big criminal enterprise underpins it. It is very easy in the Chamber of the House of Commons to focus on the humanitarian aspects and to remind Members of our obligations not only as MPs but as citizens and human beings to very vulnerable people. I completely accept that. It is too easy for people in this Chamber to turn a blind eye to what is actually going on from the economic and criminal point of view, which is, frankly, a scandal. Too little of our political debate focuses on these wicked criminal elements. We must take a much bigger view.

Bob Stewart: I ask my very good friend to forgive me for intervening a second time. I have had to deal with the mafia in the Balkans. It may be foreign-owned or run, but it uses local people. I am quite sure that, in Libya, the mafia to whom he is referring will often be Libyans who are actually working for foreigners. That makes it even more complicated.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The situation in Libya is very particular, and I do not want it to monopolise the closing moments of my speech. All I want to say with regard to Libya is that it can be seen as a test case. Certainly, Libya is the biggest immediate source of migration coming into Europe. That is what we have seen in Italy with the Five Star Movement and the remnants of the Northern League, the neo-fascist party. Their success was largely in response to this ongoing migrant crisis. I know that we are straying a bit from the private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, but it is very important in a debate of this nature, which enjoys cross-party engagement, to suggest that there are bigger problems that we need to face. They are less attractive issues, dare I say it, and they probably do not salve our consciences in the way that helping genuine refugees does, but there are important questions that any serious legislature, any serious Government and serious Members of Parliament need to look at with respect to criminality.

In conclusion, I congratulate once again the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar on his private Member’s Bill. I have heard some excellent speeches today—from the hon. Member for Bristol West and also from, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien). I close on a number of suggestions that they have made. It is important that English language teaching is a priority for this Government. It should be in place for people have come from abroad and who do not speak English. I say that not because, as the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has suggested, we feel that we speak English here and they must be like us. That was not a particularly helpful point. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough suggested that it was a way of empowering refugees and people coming into this country. That is perfectly legitimate.

The Government should also look at ways in which asylum seekers could, in an ordered process, work in the community, pay their own way and earn wages. Certainly, in my constituency, which is very near Heathrow, I have had a number of asylum seekers whose papers have not been processed in the six-month period, and they have said to me, “We really want to work. We want to be able to contribute to the economy and to look after ourselves.” There must be a way for them to do that. It cannot be beyond the wit of even this Government, dare I say it, to construct an ordered way in which asylum seekers can work and contribute to their communities. There have been many extremely helpful and extremely well-thought out suggestions. From a personal point of view, I would hesitate to relax the rules about children being allowed to bring in their parents, because of the objections that have been made and also the suspicion that these children could be ruthlessly exploited. That is a legitimate concern. I very much hope that the Government allow a money resolution so that we can debate these issues more fully in Committee.

2.38 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) who made a very eloquent, thoughtful and measured speech. Indeed, I welcome all the speeches that have been made so far in this debate. I congratulate those who secured the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) who has been leading the charge on this issue.
As the UN Declaration of Human Rights states:

“The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”

As lawmakers, we should do all we can so that we never force anyone to have to choose between living in this place of safety, and living with their family. Most reasonable people looking at the immigration rules now would agree that our refugee family reunion rules are still too narrowly drawn. Most Members in the Chamber will have encountered their own heartbreaking cases—perhaps an 18 or 19-year-old child left stranded in Libya or Lebanon while younger siblings are reunited with parents in the UK. Most strikingly, our rules on recognised child refugees in the UK are both outliers and pretty outrageous. To borrow the word the Home Affairs Committee used, it is “perverse” that unaccompanied children cannot be sponsors for their parents or carers.

In the lead-up to the Second Reading of my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill, there were many excellent articles about divided families, and one I found particularly moving was written by Sarah Temple-Smith, a children’s psychotherapist at the Refugee Council. In that article, she described the utter agony endured by two young child refugees because of separation from their families. One teenager, whose father had been killed, tells her that being apart from his mother and siblings was harder to deal with than the torture and violence suffered in detention in Libya. He was just one of an inbox full of referrals she received every day relating to children suffering from separation. It is incredibly sad, therefore, that other than Denmark, this is the only EU country that refuses to allow children to apply to have close family members join them here, if they can be found.

There cannot be a clearer illustration of why refugee family reunion is a win, win for everybody involved. It is clearly of huge benefit for the refugees here, reunited with their support network and better able to rebuild their lives. It is good for us because it means that the refugees can integrate more easily. It can literally be lifesaving for those who are granted family reunion visas to join their families here, and by providing a safe legal route it stops them turning instead to traffickers and smugglers to find their way to the UK.

In response, the Government tend to turn to two or three arguments. The first is that immigration rules already make provisions for other family members to join refugees here, but in my view the alternative rules are barely worth the paper they are written on. The legal thresholds, costs and complexity make them a poor and pale substitute for proper refugee family reunion rights. It is not unknown even for families to have to sponsor a niece or a nephew but be unable to sponsor both—a horrendous decision for anyone to have to make! I do not regard those rules as fit for purpose. Exceptional grants outside the rules are far too rare.

Secondly, the Government sometimes argue that expanding refugee family reunion rights would somehow incentivise dangerous journeys to the UK—we have heard a bit about that today. The most significant point is that the rules keep too many family members out and so force them to turn to smugglers and traffickers and to make dangerous journeys.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I want to ask the hon. Gentleman about a point I made in my speech. We cannot pretend that there is not a criminal element to this. What would he say to people who suggest, perhaps misguided, that changing the rules would bolster this criminal activity?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to flag up the trafficking and criminality. The UK, and the EU generally, have a long way to go to improve their response to that issue, but at the end of the day who are the most desperate to get here? It is the people with close family ties here, who are perhaps the parents of a child who has made it here, or 18 or 19-year-old siblings of children here. They will come here come hell or high water. The issue, then, becomes: are we going to allow them a safe legal route, established under my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill or otherwise, or are we going to leave them having ultimately to use these smugglers, traffickers and criminals? By expanding the safe legal routes, we will undermine and tackle the smuggling.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and one I can back up anecdotally. In the debate on 16 March, I mentioned a young man from Canterbury, Yohannes, who I also highlighted earlier. He is worried that his sister in a camp in Sudan might do exactly that and go to the criminals. If we were to provide, through my private Member’s Bill, a safe legal route and a right for her to come, she could fly here in a couple of hours without the danger of what might happen across the Sahara, which we do not want to speak about.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a perfect example that illustrates the argument very strongly.

If we take the approach that somehow changing the rules will provide an incentive for others to make a dangerous journey, particularly children, we have to examine the ethics of that position. Are we really saying that we are going to do something that is not in a child refugee’s interests—actually harmful to their interests—just to disincentivise other children from making that journey? That is a pretty horrendous ethical argument to propose and dangerous in itself. The key point is that this is about creating safe legal routes that keep people out of the arms of smugglers, rather than forcing them into their arms.

Neil O’Brien: The hon. Gentleman is making some really important points, and I do not necessarily disagree with him, but, on the ethics, he says it is not necessarily in the child’s interests. The thought behind the argument is that the child would not be there in the first place—would not have gone through the people smugglers and so on—if that right did not exist. I repeat: the argument is not that people will use children as anchors to cynically get something they should not get; it is that these people, desperate and destitute and with limited funds to give to people smugglers, will be tempted to pay to get just one person, particularly a smaller person, transported. It is not that they are bad people or doing anything unethical; it is that they are desperate people.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly fair point, and we can have this debate when the Bill, I hope, returns, but there is limited evidence to support the proposition that that is what happens in all the other EU countries—as I say, it is only Denmark and this country that do not give children this right. As far as I can see, the Government have not produced any
evidence that in other EU countries this has become a phenomenon out of kilter with what happens in Denmark or the UK, but if somebody wants to cite statistics showing that everyone is sending their kids unaccompanied to the other EU countries, I will look at that argument.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Having visited Libya and having been to Italy and seen migrant camps in Sicily and other parts of the south of Italy, I can provide the hon. Gentleman with some assurance on this point. I cannot cite chapter and verse with numbers, but there is a narrative that there are lots of unscrupulous people exploiting children. One need only look at the results of the Italian election. I am not saying it was the sole reason the populist right got into power, but it was a factor.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am not absolutely sure what the hon. Gentleman is getting at. My view is that there is no evidence to back up what the Government are saying about providing an incentive to go to other EU countries as opposed to Denmark and the UK. I struggle with the ethics of that argument as well. We have child refugees here, and we should have rules in place that are in their best interests and which allow them to be reunited with their families, as do these other countries.

I turn to a third argument the Government tend to use in these debates: that they are acting in different ways in response to the refugee and migration crisis. It is only fair to recognise that the Government are doing good things. The Syrian vulnerable persons scheme is making excellent progress, and it is true that the Government have a record they can be proud of in providing aid to the region around Syria in particular. That does not mean, however, that we should not look at how else we can improve our response. Broadening the category of family members, as proposed by my hon. Friend’s Bill, would have limited implications for the Home Office but transformative consequences for the people involved.

Finally, I want to touch on legal aid. I used to be an immigration solicitor, and I can say hand on heart that using legal aid for a family reunion application, which people can still do in Scotland, never remotely struck me as a wasteful use of resources, because of how serious the subject matter is—separation can be both stressful for all involved and dangerous for those who are left behind—and how complex the process is. It is not just a matter of form-filling and box-ticking; there are other questions—what documents does a person need to prove a family relationship, how much credibility will a birth or marriage certificate from a certain country hold? Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this important debate. I did not know whether I would get the pronunciation of his constituency right, but I think I was close enough—I am afraid that that might be as good as I get on Thursday afternoon.

It is fitting that this debate is taking place during Refugee Week, because refugees are among the most vulnerable people on our planet. Whether they are fleeing war, famine, national disaster or religious persecution, refugees make perilous journeys to seek asylum in a safer country, often leaving behind their families and friends.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) said, the United Kingdom has a proud history—it goes back centuries—of welcoming people from abroad who have fled danger. Although he clearly has far more historical understanding and expertise than I could ever hope to have, I am sure that we are all aware of a number of waves of immigration from people fleeing persecution—from the Huguenots and other Calvinist and Protestant refugees fleeing persecution in Europe, right through to the 20th century, when we welcomed Jewish refugees from the continent. We should also be proud of and grateful for the incredible work that is done in all our communities by many individuals, groups and community organisations, particularly faith-based organisations that do so much to welcome and support those who seek asylum and safety within our shores.

Our current rules allow for partners and dependent children under the age of 18 to be granted a refugee reunion visa, but there is scope to extend those parameters in exceptional circumstances. However, I recognise that those powers are perhaps used rather less flexibly than they ought, as we heard from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East. As many Members have said, only refugees over the age of 18 are able to sponsor those visas.

Many of us are extremely sympathetic to the intentions of the two Bills that are currently before Parliament: the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and Baroness Hamwee’s Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill in the other place. As a matter of principle and policy, we clearly wish to keep families together whenever possible, as that is usually in the best interests of children. Of course, we do have to look at the possible unintended consequences of any change, although that does not necessarily mean that we should be against the change. We need to proceed with some caution as there could be an impact due to behavioural change, particularly if that could lead to additional people being put at risk. Whereas the current policy means that refugee family reunion exists in many circumstances, we need to look at the best way of keeping families together without creating an incentive in which more children are put at risk by becoming unaccompanied migrants, which involves a huge amount of danger.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East asked whether there was any evidence that changes in western policy were having an impact on migration flows. A 2017 UN report that looked at child refugees into Italy offers some empirical evidence. The number of unaccompanied child refugees travelling into Italy rose from 75% of all refugee children travelling...
into Italy in 2015 to 92% in the year to February 2017. That is clearly a significant change in the pattern of migration. It undoubtedly has many causes, but it seems likely that part of the reason behind it is an assumption that unaccompanied children are more likely to be granted asylum and that their families might be able to join them at a later date.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend’s point goes squarely to the important question asked by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East about the evidence. Of course it is difficult to prove anything when we are dealing with hypothetical questions, and we must look at what has happened in other countries, particularly if their policy has shifted from not allowing children to sponsor adults to allowing that to happen. Does my hon. Friend agree that one difference between the countries of southern Europe and countries in northern Europe such as Denmark and the UK is that the northern countries are more likely to experience secondary movements than primary movements? Given the physical geography involved, people are more likely to arrive first in countries such as Italy, whereas secondary movements are more likely to occur further north in countries such as Britain, which can be attractive for all kinds of reasons.

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend is clearly right. We have seen with the migration from the middle east and Africa—particularly from Libya and Syria—that the first destination is overwhelmingly one of the Mediterranean countries, for the obvious reasons that have been highlighted.

Our policy needs to be one of trying to keep families together whenever possible and appropriate, but it must also limit the risk to those fleeing danger and persecution. We hear reports about the transport used by asylum seekers and refugees, particularly the maritime transport. We talk about refugee boats, but anyone who has seen the footage of the vessels that those people are travelling in—some hon. Members will have seen this in real life—will know that “boats” hardly seems an appropriate word. Too often, the vessels are barely more than flotsam and jetsam—almost anything that will float on the ocean and that people can get on top of or cling to. One of our aims must be to minimise the number of people, and particularly the number of unaccompanied children, making these extremely hazardous journeys. I recognise the points that have been made about whether we could provide safer routes and methods that could hold out hope for those who desperately need a safe haven without playing into the hands of those who would take advantage as traffickers and without putting people in unnecessary danger.

Neil O’Brien: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the BBC’s brilliant series “Exodus”, which gave the lucky people like us who were born in this country an insight into the unbelievably harrowing experiences of refugees travelling across the Mediterranean? Does he agree that an attractive idea would be to spend a larger proportion of our aid budget on trying to help people feel that they no longer need to put their lives at risk crossing the Mediterranean by helping them to build a future in their own countries?

Mike Wood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I am afraid that I have not seen that series, but I will certainly look out for it. On his second point, a key part of our international development aims is to try to tackle absolute and abject poverty, and the risks to people’s safety and security that often drive large waves of migration and lead to people seeking asylum. One of the strongest arguments for why it is right that, as a country, we commit to spending a proportion of our national wealth on international development and overseas development aid is absolutely that it helps to reduce the numbers of people involved and the risks and dangers to them.

UNICEF’s six-point agenda for action acknowledges that children who travel alone are more easily preyed on and more vulnerable to violence and abuse. We should be wary of changes to legislation that risk increasing the numbers of children put into that position if there are other means of keeping families together and of being able to offer people a safe haven from danger.

I look forward to listening to the debate about changing the rules on the sponsorship of refugees and whether it would be right and effective to allow those under 18 to sponsor. I hope that the House will have an opportunity to debate such legislation without too much more delay. However, other action could be taken to improve the welfare and safety of those seeking asylum—refugees coming into the United Kingdom. The first, as we have heard, is to ensure that, after Brexit, the United Kingdom and the European Union continue to operate on the basis of keeping families together so that refugees with close relatives in the United Kingdom who come into another European Union country are able to join them here, and the few refugees who come into the United Kingdom and have relatives in another European country are similarly able to join their relatives in those countries. I was very pleased to hear the Solicitor General commit to ensuring that that happens after Brexit.

What would clearly make a big difference to not only child refugees but refugees more broadly would be to make sure that asylum claims are processed quickly, without unnecessary delay. It is not only those claiming asylum who are adversely affected by long delays in processing claims while they are unable to work; our local economies and local societies similarly miss out because those people’s ability to contribute to those local economies and societies is severely restricted while their claims are being processed. I look forward to hearing the Minister say what more can be done to make sure that asylum claims are processed in a timely and efficient manner so that those who need asylum in our country are able to live here, to settle, to contribute and to integrate, and so that our communities are able to welcome and support them.

3.3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): This is the 65th anniversary of the signing of the European convention on human rights. One of the fundamental rights guaranteed under article 8 and enshrined in UK law is the right to family life. The article states:

“Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has already mentioned the UN convention on the rights of the child. Unfortunately, the UK is out of sync with its own law by not applying the right to family life to refugee children.
As we have heard, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar ( Angus Brendan MacNeil), seeks to amend the law so that child refugees are allowed exactly the same rights as adult refugees, as well as legal aid to make their application. I support his Bill.

I emphasise that that only applies to children who have been processed and have lawfully acquired refugee status, and who therefore have the legal right to be in this country. I am sure that anybody with children of school age still worries a little when their children go on a school trip, even if it is only for a day. Imagine those children having to flee their home after witnessing the ravages and horrors of war and to make dangerous journeys over thousands of miles alone, having left their family behind. It is not something that any parent would wish on any child, let alone their own. Then imagine that, having made that journey and reached a safe haven, that child cannot be reunited with his or her parents or siblings. Imagine the mental trauma that the child has to go through alone. It is inhumane to prevent any child from having access to their family.

There is an EU directive on family reunion, which has been adopted by 25 out of the 27 EU members. Article 10 of the directive specifies that unaccompanied child refugees are entitled to be reunited with their family members. Two countries chose not to opt in. Ireland has introduced its own domestic law right to allow child refugees to be sponsors for their family members, so that they can join them. Only Denmark and the United Kingdom are out of step with the rest of the EU.

Alex Sobel: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, when the Prime Minister says “Brexit means Brexit”, this is what she means—that refugee children will not be able to be reunited with their families? Does not our international reputation potentially suffer in the same way that the United States’s has this week if we adopt such policies?

Bambos Charalambous: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is right that, given the uncertainty about what will happen post Brexit, we cannot be sure of anything, and these issues need to be spelled out and confirmed as soon as possible.

Why would anyone want to deprive these child refugees of the right to be with their parents and families? These are vulnerable children, some suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, dealing with the bureaucracy of being a refugee, having difficulty accessing support, in a culturally different environment and now lacking the support network of their family. Why heap that unnecessary cruelty on a child when it is obvious that a child refugee will do so much better in all areas with the support of their family?

The UK has already failed in its promise to accept 480 children from the Calais camp, which is shameful, and it is only thanks to the phenomenal work of charities such as Help Refugees that some of the Calais children living in the woods are alive today. I hope that hon. Members at least have the humanity to do the right thing by supporting the children who are already here.

Having looked at the first part of the Bill, I will now focus on the second part, which relates to legal aid. Legal aid was made unavailable for refugee family reunion cases following the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. It is difficult enough for adults to navigate the myriad complex legal procedures and forms that need to be completed. With family reunion applications, there is an additional requirement: family members have to attend the closest British embassy, which will necessarily mean travelling through conflict zones. In some cases, there is a need for DNA tests, and documentation gathering is also a necessary part of applications. The British Red Cross highlighted the complexities of applying for family reunion in its report “Not so Straightforward”.

As child refugees have no other way of accessing the legal support they need because of the bureaucracy created by the Government, it is only right that they should have access to legal aid to help them to navigate this process. If the Government want to reduce the cost of the Bill, perhaps they should look at making the process of family reunion easier and therefore cheaper. Since the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act came into effect in 2013, there has been a cut of more than £600 million in the legal aid budget, which is over and above the savings that the Treasury was demanding of the Ministry of Justice. The Act is due to be reviewed this year. I am not aware of how much progress has been made on that front, but the Bill gives the perfect opportunity for the Ministry of Justice to examine the impact of the legal aid cuts, particularly in the field of family reunion, and to put some money back where it is needed.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): A few weeks ago, I spent a few days in Djibouti in Africa, and I saw wave after wave of young people—predominantly men—on the march, walking away from the refugee camp set up there, which we visited. They were leaving because there was no secondary school. We all know that the overseas aid budget causes some controversy. I support it, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if there is a finite amount of money, we are better off setting up a secondary school, rather than trying to stretch the pounds over here, which in the end deprives people of some of the opportunities I have just referenced, which we could be funding more abroad.

Bambos Charalambous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is right about refugee camps needing more support and the provision of education. Many people spend years and years in refugee camps and their education suffers. However, we want to tackle the cause of this. The reason that people are in refugee camps is war. Unless more is done to stop war and conflict, these refugee camps will continue to exist and there will be more asylum seekers and refugees.

There will no doubt be critics who say that this will open the floodgates, with more people traffickers exploiting young people and more migrants wanting to come to the UK. However, I remind hon. Members that the countries neighbouring Syria, such as Jordan and Turkey, have taken in millions of Syrian refugees, while across Europe, Germany, Italy and France received at least twice as many asylum applications as the UK in 2017. The UK received less than 3% of all asylum claims made in the EU last year. I also remind hon. Members that, in 2017, 3,119 people lost their lives in their desperate attempts to cross the Mediterranean to claim asylum. Even for those who make it to the UK, the
asylum system here is extremely tough, with only 29% of initial asylum applications made in the UK being successful and only 33% of appeals being successful.

I want to give hon. Members an idea of the numbers that will be helped by the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. Last year, only 794 children who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children were granted asylum. The Bill seeks to help those 794 children—that figure is less than the number of peers in the other place—and allow them to be reunited with their families. Not allowing child refugees to be reunited with their family members is morally wrong, legally wrong and inhumane. I invite all hon. Members to support the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and I encourage the Government to bring forward a money resolution to allow the Bill to progress so that these children can be reunited with their families.

3.12 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate those who have brought forward this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I have pronounced his constituency much worse than our English colleagues have done this afternoon. I hope my mum, who is an Irish speaker, is not watching or there will be a row when I get home.

To be serious, the true horror of the reality of the pain of children separated from their families was brought home to us this week by the audio and video footage of the children weeping in the cages constructed for them under the immoral and ghastly policies of Donald Trump. Like other Members on the Opposition side of the House and, I suppose, some on the Government side as well, I was a little disappointed that the Prime Minister could not bring herself to condemn Trump yesterday in quite the way I would have liked. There are many of us who would do so today without hesitation. I may have many criticisms of the UK Government, but I do not think they would ever stoop to that level, and I am pleased to be able to say that. It is very important for us all to distance ourselves from what is happening in America—

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I did.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Well, you’re much better than Donald Trump.

Joanna Cherry: Yes—credit where credit is due. That said, there is a lot more that we could do to help refugees in this country. We have heard some very thoughtful contributions about the pros and cons of doing that. I am very firmly on the side of my hon. Friend, whose Bill is a small step in the right direction, but there is still a lot more to be done.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) mentioned the size of the displacement problem that the world faces at the moment. The UNHCR reports that the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, with unprecedented 68.5 million people forced from their homes around the world. Among those, there are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. European Union statistics show a significant increase in the number of asylum applications over the past few years, and we need only to switch on our televisions every night to see the impact of the refugee crisis on Europe and the European Union.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, current rules for family reunion in the United Kingdom are too narrowly drawn, and the private Member’s Bill before this House, and that in the other place promoted by Baroness Hamwee, who I am pleased to call a friend, try to widen eligibility. At the moment, immigration rules state that “adult refugees in the UK can only be joined by their spouse/partner and their dependent children who are under the age of 18.”

No provision is made for dependants who are over 18 and that can—and has—resulted in, for example, a sole 18-year-old girl who has fled her country being left in a very vulnerable situation in a refugee camp. I urge hon. Members and the Government to support my hon. Friend’s Bill. It is modest but, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) said, it will make a significant difference to a number of people.

The Bill would expand the criteria for who qualifies as a family member for the purpose of refugee reunion, so that young people over the age of 18, and elderly parents, can live in safety with their families in the UK. It would also give unaccompanied refugee children in the UK the right to sponsor their close family to come and join them. Importantly, it would reintroduce legal aid so that refugees who have lost everything have the support they need to afford and navigate the complicated process of being reunited with their families. I ask the UK Government to support the Bill and to take a leaf out of Scotland’s book in two respects—first, because we still have legal aid in Scotland for such situations and, secondly, because of our refugee resettlement and integration programme.

I would like briefly to address the “pull or push” argument that has been mentioned this afternoon, because I am aware of two reports that emanate from this House that show no evidence for such a pull factor. The first report was written with the assistance of the Human Trafficking Foundation and published in the House of Lords last summer. It was an independent inquiry into the situation of separated and unaccompanied minors in parts of Europe. If hon. Members look at it, they will see that it found no evidence for the pull factor. Indeed, it referred back to an earlier report that was published by the Lords EU Committee in 2016, which found absolutely no evidence to support the argument for a pull factor. It said that, if there were a pull factor of the kind sometimes posited, one would expect to see evidence of that in other EU member states that participate in the family reunification directive and have more generous family reunion rules than we do. The Lords Committee, and the Human Trafficking Foundation—two separate reports, a year apart—found no evidence to that end. We should therefore proceed on the basis of evidence from reputable reports, rather than the impressions of hon. Members, important as those may be.

It is important that hon. Members visit refugee camps abroad—I visited the camps in Calais and Dunkirk when they still existed, as well as one in Palestine, and I hope to go to Jordan later this year with Lord Dubs. It is important that MPs visit those camps and bring their experiences home, but our experiences and impressions cannot substitute for evidence from careful reports.
Huw Merriman: The hon. and learned Lady and I have had this exchange before. I recommend that she goes to the camp in Jordan—I found it extraordinary when I went there with Save the Children. I respect the evidence that she mentions. It is a fascinating point. The issue I have is that the aid workers I was with—they were from reputable organisations, although I will not list them—were absolutely determined that there would be a pull factor because it is predominantly the young who are on the move—I have seen them. I cannot think why I would dispute what I have heard from those on the ground.

Joanna Cherry: That is as may be, but there is no proper, forensic evidence to support the argument that the Bill would have a pull factor.

Kwasi Kwarteng: rose—

Joanna Cherry: I am going to make some progress, because I am conscious of the time. We will return to these issues in more detail.

I said that I wanted the UK Government to take two leaves out of Scotland’s book. The first is on legal aid. Legal aid is available in Scotland. We have managed to make it available. We actually spend less per capita in Scotland on legal aid than is spent in England and Wales, but we still make it more widely available. Do not take my word for it. An independent review of the Scottish legal aid system published earlier this year reported that, for less spend per capita than England and Wales, legal aid is more widely available in Scotland and covers a wider range of categories. Where there is a will there is a way.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, I used to work in the Scottish legal system and did a lot of legal aid work. I can tell Conservative Members, as I have said to their colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, that the English legal aid system would benefit greatly from looking north to what has been achieved on a smaller budget. As has been said by others, the law on this subject is complex. People who are already vulnerable and separated from those who normally give them guidance need the assistance of a solicitor to find their way through it.

I would like to say something about the integration strategy in Scotland. I will keep it brief. The hon. Members for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke about good works in their constituencies. I am very proud of the work done in my constituency by the Kurdish community centre and by the Welcoming to integrate refugees, and also of the work done in primary schools in my constituency, particularly Redhall and Oxgangs, which are rights-respecting schools that have worked on big projects about welcoming child refugees. I have written to the UK Government about that.

In Scotland, we launched the New Scots strategy. The UNHCR UK representative said that he believed the New Scots strategy could be used as an example and model not just for the United Kingdom but for many countries around the world which host refugees. At the launch of the strategy, he said that, having left family far away, it is for many refugees a daily pain to think about a loved one, and he stressed to the Scottish audience how critical it is that the UK Government adopt more flexible and humane policies when it comes to bringing families together. He recognised that the powers are reserved to this Parliament at Westminster, and called on his Scottish audience to continue to influence and affect change here at Westminster.

That is what we seek to do here today. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has brought forward a private Member’s Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East and the whole of the SNP will continue to try to pressure the UK Government to do more to help refugees, particularly the most vulnerable child refugees.

3.22 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing the debate and on the work he has been doing in this area. Many Members have made contributions to the debate this afternoon, and they have been thought-provoking and positive.

This is Refugee Week and it is appropriate that we acknowledge the work done by many British charities both in this country and abroad. I have seen the work that goes on day in, day out in my own city of Manchester. Only a few weeks ago, I went to Bangladesh with the Rafay Mussarat Foundation. In two days during the month of Ramadan, it delivered over 300,000 meals. We should be proud of the work that charities do, and how the British people contribute and help refugees both here and in the rest of the world. In Refugee Week, it has been wonderful to celebrate all the ways that refugees have enriched our lives and our society. Yesterday, I too was at Speaker’s House with the UNHCR to hear inspiring stories of refugees.

The celebrations have been somewhat overshadowed, however, by the tragic and shocking images from the US of children being forcibly separated from their families and caged like animals. We have all been disturbed by the recordings of crying children and images from inside these centres. It is estimated that nearly 2,000 children have been separated from their parents since the zero-tolerance policy began in April. More than 100 were under the age of four.

The scenes from the US are a stark reminder of the consequences of the worst excesses of a hostile and criminalising approach to migrants and refugees. While the Prime Minister has correctly criticised Trump’s approach to family break-up, this Government’s policies have the same effect. Our immigration system breaks up families, too. Currently, adult refugees can apply only for their spouse and dependent children under 18 to join them in the UK. This leaves grandparents, siblings and children over 18 stranded in peril.

We also have the perverse situation where unaccompanied children are not allowed to sponsor family members to join them. Tesfa fled Eritrea when he was still a child. After a terrible year-long journey, when he was crammed on a boat crossing the Mediterranean with 400 other people, he arrived in the UK and claimed asylum. He is now living and studying here but finds it very hard to be without his family—the people he feels most safe and secure with. He has no right to sponsor them to join him in the UK.

When we grant refugee status to someone, we need to provide them with a realistic chance of integrating in the UK. That means English language training and not cutting off asylum support after 28 days, which is
shorter than the minimum five weeks that it takes to apply for universal credit, and it means allowing them to reunite with their families.

The private Member’s Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar will rectify some anomalies and allow refugee families to be reunited in the UK. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will support the Bill at its next stage? If not, will she confirm that the Government will not block it in the way they are blocking my private Member’s Bill on boundaries? This is a matter of morality, and it is vital that the will of the House be heard and respected.

There has been some troubling rhetoric from the Government in our previous debates about family reunion. They have argued that we do not want to create pull factors to attract refugees to come to the UK, as if there were not enough push factors to force people to flee their homes. I assure the Minister that that is never done lightly. Donald Trump’s rhetoric over the past few days has shown the chilling extreme that this kind of thinking can lead to. I hope that the Minister will unequivocally condemn Trump’s remarks about allowing the US to be a “migrant camp” or “refugee holding facility”.

Mr Tanmanjext Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point—refugees are indeed to be valued. While they are fleeing injustices from other parts of the world, we should not be following the example of President Trump in the United States. If anything, we should be showing compassion in our policy towards refugees.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and wholeheartedly agree—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There seems to be a bit of concern—every Member who is here was here when I came into the Chair. [Interruption.] Let us leave it to the Chair to decide whether interventions can be made.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister halt the Government’s current approach, which seems to be to make the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK so awful that nobody would ever want to come? I will mention two ways in which this has emerged particularly acutely.

First, the conditions in some private asylum accommodation are abhorrent. My attention was recently drawn to private asylum accommodation in my constituency that was infested with cockroaches, rodents and bedbugs. Nobody, let alone families with children, should be forced to live in these conditions. This accommodation passed safety and standards tests, so will the Minister review these standards? Unfortunately, we know that this is not an isolated case. Our asylum accommodation system is not fit for purpose. I fear that, on a certain level, the Government accept these conditions for a reason connected with their pull factor argument. They want the asylum process in the UK to be so awful that no one will risk it.

The renewal of the asylum accommodation contracts is coming up. Can the Minister tell us which private bodies, separate from local authorities, have been contracted to provide housing for refugees? Can she also tell us something about the involvement of private firms in the rehousing of refugees, temporary or otherwise?

What assessment has been made of their performance delivery, and are any new contracts likely to be awarded this year?

Indefinite immigration detention continues to be a blight on our country’s moral record. Refugees and asylum seekers are frequently detained hundreds of miles from where they were living, and they are moved around constantly, often during the night. That makes it very difficult for them to maintain contact with family and friends, especially when phones are routinely confiscated. The current system to prevent vulnerable people from being detained is not working. We know that torture survivors and other vulnerable people are not identified before their detention and that it is extremely difficult for them to be released once they are there, although there has been a significant reduction in the number of pregnant women in detention.

I look forward to reading the Shaw review and the Government’s response when they are published. I hope that they will propose the far-reaching reforms that are so desperately needed.

The Labour party is clear about this issue. We would uphold the right to a family life. We would allow the carers or parents of child refugees to come here. We would also end the practice of deporting children who are not entitled to be here once they turn 18, even when their parents are entitled to be here. We would end indefinite detention and the outsourcing of detention, and we would ensure that families fleeing war and persecution were housed in safe and sanitary conditions.

3.32 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing not only the debate—which, during Refugee Week, is very timely—but a Committee stage for his private Member’s Bill. Let me also acknowledge the support from Members on both sides of the House today, and in the other place, for the bringing together of refugee families. I can reassure the House that the Government have listened carefully to the many thoughtful and compassionate contributions that have been made, and will continue to listen. I particularly thank Members for the constructive tone of the debate, which I have found both useful and interesting.

I should acknowledge the work of the non-governmental organisations that are supporting changes in refugee family reunion arrangements. I have met the representatives of several of them over the past few months. I am grateful for their valuable insights, and for the constructive dialogue that they have had with my officials and with me.

During the last few months several Members, including some who are no longer in the Chamber, have beaten a path to my door. Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge their expertise and their keen interest in these issues. The hon. Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) have been particularly assiduous in taking the time to come and speak to me. They have frequently used the opportunity presented by the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar to highlight some of the issues about which they feel most strongly, and they have, of course, given me the chance to reflect.
I fear that the hon. Gentleman has pushed the envelope a bit today. Certainly, by the time he got on to west coast fishing fleets, I was at rather a loss to know what we were actually debating, but I commend him for his ingenuity.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Minister knows the issue.

Caroline Nokes: I think it might have been the second time it had cropped up for me this afternoon. However, some important points have been made, and I thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) for their poetic contributions, which brought some real thoughtfulness and passion to the issue.

A number of Members raised the issue of the scheduling of parliamentary business, which is of course a matter for the Leader of the House, but she and I will have taken note of the representations made today.

I want to briefly reflect on some of the comments made about asylum seekers and their ability to work. They are of course allowed to undertake volunteering opportunities, but we must carefully bear it in mind that those voluntary opportunities should not amount to unpaid work or job substitution, because we certainly do not wish to see them taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. I have heard the concerns of many Members about delays in the asylum system. It is in fact stabilising, but we have an ambitious plan to reduce the number of outstanding decisions and the length of time people wait for a decision, which is very important.

We are on track to resettle 20,000 refugees from Syria and a further 30,000 children and families from the wider middle east and north Africa—MENA—region. Under our resettlement schemes we deliberately target those in the greatest need of assistance, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. We work closely with the UNHCR, as it is best placed to identify people living in formal refugee camps, informal settlements and host communities who would benefit most from resettlement.

We are also enabling civil society to play a greater role in refugee resettlement. I was very pleased this Monday to be at the organisation Reset, to which the Government have awarded £1 million of funding to help community groups with sponsorship schemes. I often use the phrase that they are well placed to wrap community groups with sponsorship schemes. I have heard the concerns of many Members about delays in the asylum system. It is in fact stabilising, but we have an ambitious plan to reduce the number of outstanding decisions and the length of time people wait for a decision, which is very important.

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Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) rose—

Caroline Nokes: I apologise for not giving way; the hon. Lady has not been in her place for the entire debate, and I have very little time.

The Green Paper on integration that has come forward for the Leader of the House, but she and I will have taken note of the representations made today.

My hon. Friends the Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and a number of Opposition Members rightly mentioned perilous journeys. We do not wish to see children in the hands of traffickers. From my earliest days at the Home Office I have been struck by the links between organised crime, people trafficking, modern slavery and violence against women and girls, and we are determined to do our utmost to tackle trafficking. Breaking the smugglers’ business model and their trafficking rings remains a key priority for this Government. Under Operation Sophia, our commitment is to work hard to its full mandate through to the end of December 2018. Our naval assets have destroyed 182 smuggling boats and saved 13,400 lives since the operation began, but we are of course conscious that we continue to see boats come across the Mediterranean and children and families making very dangerous journeys.

I have little time left, but I would like to lapse somewhat into the anecdotal. This week I met a group of students from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. They had spent some time in Europe over the past few years and had come to the British Parliament for a tour, and had the opportunity to spend a few moments talking to me. I was not sure how to begin my comments as Immigration Minister on the day that I had watched footage of children crying in cages and had listened to the terrible audio recordings, so I kicked off with some trepidation, recognising that my audience included US citizens who had perhaps had a vote in the last presidential election. I said that I sought in our refugee and immigration policies to ensure that I chose not to model myself on their President. I was not sure how that message would go down, but it was welcomed by this group of US teenagers. They told me that what they had found most moving during their time in Europe over the past few weeks was meeting individual refugees and hearing their stories, and we have had a little of that this afternoon from individual Members who have highlighted the excellent work being done in their constituencies. Indeed, that work goes on in my constituency, and I spent the Friday before last with the Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group, where many of the issues, including the right to work and legal aid, were raised with me. I have to thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, because his private Member’s Bill and this afternoon’s debate give us the opportunity to reflect carefully on such issues.

This Government recognise the need for a fair and humane immigration system and, within that, the importance of policies that work for individual asylum seekers and those granted refugee status. We are currently reviewing our policy on refugee family reunion in the context of our wider asylum and resettlement strategy, and I look forward to continuing my productive discussions with hon. Members and key NGO partners on this complex, sensitive issue.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank all the Members who have taken part in today’s debate, which, as the Immigration Minister just said, had a fantastic tone to
it. Many great points have been made, so my best advice to people who have missed it is to look at Hansard tomorrow. Fantastic points were made by the hon. Members for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood). I note that the hon. Member for Spelthorne was somewhat hesitant, but we can work with hesitancy, and the rest of his speech was supportive, so I thank him for that, as I thank the hon. Members for Harborough and for Dudley South. In fact, I reserve special thanks for those three Government Members, because we will need to find at least eight Conservatives for the Bill Committee. There could be nobody better than those three, so I will be grateful if they want to be on it. Indeed, if anybody else wants to get involved, please get in touch.

There were several great speeches from the Opposition Benches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) made a speech that I wished I had made myself, pointing out the 794 children came to this country last year, which is less than the number of Members of the House of Lords. There is an interesting point to be made about that when we talk about pull factors: if the pull factor was a reality, none of those 794 would have come to the United Kingdom, because they would have gone to another country that had rights for child refugees. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said when so eloquently talking about my modest Bill, the pull factor is not real, as House of Lords reports have pointed out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned legal aid, which is actually a minor point because less is spent per capita in Scotland, where people have the right to it, so I think that the right to legal aid could easily be extended to everybody. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said that if we want to debate this matter further, we must get the Bill into Committee, where we can have a more in-depth debate. I look forward to Members from both sides of the House being on that Committee and to the Government granting the money resolution.

I will leave the last word to J. J. Bola, who summed things up eloquently with the following:

“kiss your families goodnight be glad that the monsters never came for you.”

I mentioned Iain Lom, the highland poet. Some 372 years have passed since the battle of Inverlochy, but I cannot be confident that descendants of mine will not be refugees at some point over the next 372 years and therefore may need the sort of legal protections that we will be introducing.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House notes that 18 to 24 June is Refugee Week; further notes that many families throughout the world have been torn apart by war and persecution; welcomes the fact that the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No.2) Bill was given its Second Reading without opposition on 16 March 2018; and calls on the Government to support the provisions of that Bill.

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### Erasmus Plus Programme

3.44 pm

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to negotiate continued access to the Erasmus+ programme and its successor schemes beyond 2020.

Almost two years on from the referendum, the Government have not answered some of the key questions about how we will continue to co-operate with the Erasmus+ programme post-2020. The British Government cannot afford to duck this issue, because that would put at risk the future openness and vibrancy of our university and youth sectors.

I applied for this debate to bring the issue to the Chamber for the first time in five years and to seek reassurance from the Government that they will actually commit to preserving the Erasmus+ scheme post-2020. I am aware that, on many issues, Brexit hangs over us. However, I stress that this issue cuts across political parties and across pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit lines. I have gained support for this debate from Members of all parties, from the 2017 intake to the Father of the House, and representing all four nations. Those Members are united by a deep concern about the Government’s lack of full commitment to maintaining the Erasmus+ scheme beyond 2020 and to getting on with negotiating the modalities of how we would do that.

What is at stake here is the future existence of one of our most successful exports. The higher education sector is an export that has greatly enriched this country. The question is whether we will maintain an open and accessible higher education sector.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He talks about exports but, of course, we have a situation in which 10,000 students a year leave the UK to study abroad and 30,000 students come over to study in the UK. Why on earth would the European Union not want our engagement to continue?

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle**: I agree it is very likely that the European Union would want our engagement to continue, which is why, to some extent, this is an easy door to push against and walk through. The foreign students coming into the UK are economically an export for us, because they bring foreign money to invest in this country. It might seem strange but higher education is a net export, as it brings cash into this country.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): We would all acknowledge that the Erasmus+ scheme has been of huge benefit to our country. Indeed, over the past 30 years, 600,000 people from the UK have benefited. Erasmus+ is unique in providing additional funding for disadvantaged and disabled students, which is why the Government should fully support the scheme.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle**: I totally agree, and I believe the Government are in favour of the Erasmus+ scheme. We have heard positive sounds from the Government, but we now have to put our money where our mouth is.
Erasmus+ is a valuable resource that contributes a vast amount of scope and depth to the British university and youth sectors. My former colleagues and I spent three years in and out of Brussels negotiating the current scheme, which was formed in 2014, and it brought together the Socrates, Erasmus, Leonardo, Grundtvig and Youth in Action programmes—the higher education, technical education, schools exchange and youth work programmes—and sometimes we forget that Erasmus+ incorporates all those different sectors of exchange.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and powerful speech. I went on one of the predecessor schemes. Has he seen the figures from Universities UK showing that 7.8% of black and minority ethnic graduates who have not studied abroad are unemployed, whereas 4.6% of black and minority ethnic graduates who have taken part in student mobility projects, such as Erasmus+ and its predecessors, are unemployed? I did it, and I did not turn out too badly.

The Government place great faith in the race disparity audit. Does my hon. Friend agree it is important that we should cherish and prioritise Erasmus+?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Some predecessor and current programmes of Erasmus+ are particularly good at diversity; 50% of its participants are from economically deprived or other minority backgrounds, and it helps improve not only grades, but longer-term outcomes. If I may say so, my hon. Friend has done very well for herself.

With a budget of €14.7 billion, Erasmus is an educational scheme that is not only continental, but global in reach.

Huw Merriman: I am particularly interested to know, as the hon. Gentleman has such a good understanding of this, why, given that such a wide-ranging Erasmus+ programme is already in existence, the budget is estimated to double to €30 billion. What would we get for that? What would all Erasmus participants get for that?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is a good question. Not only is the youth part of the programme fully subscribed—I am talking about just British applications—but projects that in other places would be accepted are having not to be accepted at the moment because the money runs out before we are able to work down the whole list. I served on the programming committee for a number of years. We would analyse good programmes and then just work our way down until the money ran out. At the moment, the money is running out about halfway down the list. The doubling of the budget would therefore allow good programmes and projects that help disadvantaged British kids to travel and go on exchanges. That is exactly why we need an increased budget and why it is being negotiated with the Commission at the moment.

Every sector of lifelong learning is advantaged in some way or another from the Erasmus scheme, and most experts agree that Erasmus has a positive impact, as we have already talked about. Research shows that 81% of students who have gone abroad studying with the Erasmus scheme get a first or upper-second honours degree. That figure is 10% higher than the average in the university sector. At least 2 million young people across the continent have gone on these schemes in the past 30 years, with 600,000 of them having been from the UK just on this current scheme.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Until the hon. Gentleman started to speak, I did not know of his personal involvement in this programme, which is excellent news. I have just received a message from my son, who is one of the students to have taken part in this scheme. He said that this programme “builds future leaders with the self-confidence, determination and resilience of living and making it work in a foreign culture.” I am sure he is one of many.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree, and I will try to touch on one case study from my local university, which says similar things.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have been a foreign modern languages teacher for some years, so I know that knowing a foreign language is such a huge advantage to future employment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Erasmus programme is a very good vehicle for making that happen? It gives fantastic opportunities to young people for further employment in this country.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. The biggest employer in my constituency is the headquarters of American Express Europe and the biggest problem it has is finding young people with language skills to go into that sector—the Erasmus scheme really helps with that.

Being an alumnus of the University of Sussex and having part of that university in my constituency, it would remiss of me not to mention the role it had in founding the Erasmus programme. Hywel Jones served as the director of education, training and policy at the European Commission for 20 years at the start of the programme. In a recent speech, he talked about modelling the Erasmus programme on the work he had pioneered at the University of Sussex, where it had made sure that all disciplines, not just languages, although importantly including languages, allowed a study year abroad that was part of the degree programme, not just additional to it. His vision was to get that idea recognised throughout Europe. He said:

“...said that I was convinced that such an idea could be developed on a European-wide basis”.

Well, that idea became Erasmus, and now Erasmus+. From the University of Sussex was born an idea that has become so entrenched in the learning of so many that for many students it is now a byword for student exchange itself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the House for consideration. It is not just his university that does so well; other universities throughout the United Kingdom do equally well, with Queen’s University Belfast being one of them. In 2017-18, Queen’s attracted some £1.4 million for the Erasmus project—that is the sixth highest amount in the whole United Kingdom—and since 2012, 1,429 Queen’s students have benefited from funding to the tune of £4.68 million. Queen’s University in Northern Ireland is also doing its bit.
Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Fantastic. Many universities are doing their bit and it is really good to hear what Queen’s is doing. In the past three years alone, £230 million has been invested in the higher education sector part of the Erasmus scheme for the UK.

Amy Walker graduated from the University of Sussex with a BA in geography and international development. She says:

“I spent six months living and studying in Amsterdam, and I believe they were among the most formative, productive and happiest months of my life.”

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I am glad that he has brought this matter to the House’s attention. Does he agree that, in addition to all the many benefits that Members have already mentioned, there is the benefit of increasing this country’s soft power? As we are leaving the European Union, it is particularly important that we have as many good relationships with other countries as possible. Erasmus is one way to create that soft power.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That soft power is so vital, as is the provision of diverse, international campuses that then encourage other students from other parts of the world to come to study at them. They breed a virtuous circle.

Amy said that her time in Amsterdam gave her the motivation to study. Beforehand, she was perhaps not so motivated, but now understands the importance of learning, in a deeper way than before. Another student, Ifat Shaltiel, studied for a BA in English language teaching, plus Italian and Spanish—my goodness, what an incredible list of things to study—at Sussex. She said:

“Every person I have met...in the Erasmus programme cannot praise the experience enough;”

and she considers it enormously valuable, particularly for language teaching.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the Universities UK report that says that students who study overseas are significantly more likely to enter managerial positions within 10 years of graduating, half as likely to be long-term unemployed as their non-mobile colleagues, and more likely to start their own companies than other graduates? Does he therefore agree that making sure that the Erasmus+ programme continues for the long term is invaluable, because of its long-term benefits to this country?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. There are examples coming out of our ears of the good work that the programme does.

Last month, Universities UK launched its Go International project to outline the reasons why international exchange is vital for our economy, education sector and young people. It also produced a very good little report. In fact, the Minister for Universities came and launched the project with us and said some good words about the importance of international exchange. We need those good words to turn into good actions, so that we can secure the Erasmus programme’s position. I believe that we all share that desire.

Dr Huq: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as the obvious numerical and financial benefits that higher education brings that we can see in Horizon 2020 funding and the Galileo programme, there are also socio-cultural benefits, as he has alluded to himself, to these type of exchanges? The fact is that, two years on from the referendum, we are still in the dark about what will happen post 2020. That shows that, with a lack of contingency planning, the Government rushed into this referendum, and they still do not know what they are doing now.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I understand, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have probably been too generous in taking interventions.

It is not just the university exchange programme that is important. The European Voluntary Service has allowed young Europeans to travel, 50% of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds. In many respects, EVS was the forerunner of the International Citizen Service, which we now run in this country. The question is how the ICS will integrate into the new programme that goes forward.

Erasmus is currently being negotiated for renewal, but there are no clear guarantees from the Government on its future, and that is adding great uncertainty to the sector. Although the Prime Minister gave assurances at the end of last year that Erasmus would be maintained until the end of the current financial arrangements, there have been few assurances beyond that.

In December, the Government confirmed that they value international exchanges, and that, in the event of a no deal, the students could continue with these exchanges. In the Prime Minister’s Florence speech, she indicated that that was her position. The first question that I asked in this Chamber when I arrived here a year ago was whether we would continue with the programme post 2020. The reality is that we have not yet seen a strategy from this Government of how that will be achieved.

Last month, the European Union proposed an outline of its strategy. It proposed that countries can buy into the new programme, but outlined that non-EEA countries and non-partner countries can only take part as third countries. The Government must use their position now to make sure that, in the education council, they are negotiating for that clause to be loosened up. I guess I need to ask the following questions. Can the Minister tell me what discussions he has had in the education council to ensure that the clauses will allow third countries to participate at a decision-making level, and not just at a buying-in level with no ability to make decisions about the targets of the programme? What instructions has the Minister given his officials to negotiate those respective clauses, which are being negotiated at the moment, on a statutory basis? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in Europe, and what co-ordination has there been with the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that, as we are not likely to be an EU member or an EEA member and clearly not a candidate or partner country member, we can still take part as a former member that wants good relations with the European Union?
I raised many of these questions in the Westminster Hall debate. How will our current programme co-operate with our International Citizen Service programmes? How are we setting out our strategy? I have yet to see the answers to those questions. I fear that, without proper negotiation, like Canada we will have to buy in access. Canadian undergraduates do not have access to the full exchange part of the programme and Canadian youth organisations cannot initiate programmes and activities. With the headquarters of so many international youth organisations based here in the UK, such as the girl guides, we risk their future if we do not allow them to initiate programmes here in the UK. To resolve these issues will require great clarity and direction, and an acknowledgement of the great benefits of the programme.

In the meantime, if the Government hope to maintain a youth and university sector that is open to co-operation with other universities across Europe, they should start by offering a full and comprehensive assurance that Erasmus+ and all the related programmes, including the European Solidarity Corps that takes over from the youth programme, yet it equates to only 10% of the finance of why the Erasmus scheme is important. Some 16,000 students, young people and other staff from the UK go on the scheme every year, and it is vital to keep an ongoing relationship with the EU in respect of educational and cultural programmes, and academic benefits to our universities through that diversity. More than 100,000 EU students currently number of students who come to Britain from outside the EU each year, much of which arises from academic benefits to our universities through that diversity. It is estimated that they generate more than £4 billion for our economy each year, much of which arises from off-campus expenditure. These students also generate a huge amount of local jobs, both on campus and off campus. It is really important that we keep EU students interested in coming to UK universities as their destination choice, which is why it is so good that the Government have focused on ensuring that there is clarity regarding how much they will be expected to pay. When it comes to the next generation, we must be ambitious, and I totally support that. The most popular host countries for students who go on work placements are France, the US, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy—most are in the EU. That is why it is so important that we try to stay in the Erasmus+ student exchange. I was delighted to hear the Prime Minister say in her Mansion House speech that she wished to keep an ongoing relationship with the EU in respect of educational and cultural programmes, and she was talking about Erasmus+. Doing so is the right thing, and that is the aim of the Prime Minister and the Minister.

Alongside Erasmus+, we must remember the greater number of students who come to Britain from outside the programme. More than 100,000 EU students currently study in the UK, and they bring huge cultural and academic benefits to our universities through that diversity. It is estimated that they generate more than £4 billion for our economy each year, much of which arises from off-campus expenditure. These students also generate a huge amount of local jobs, both on campus and off campus. It is really important that we keep EU students interested in coming to UK universities as their destination choice, which is why it is so good that the Government have focused on ensuring that there is clarity regarding the fees paid by EU students. I say to the Minister that we must continue to give those EU students clarity so that when they apply for our university places, they know how much they will be expected to pay.

Another, bigger issue is the work that our universities do on science and research. Continued collaboration is vital to keeping British universities in their leading role across the world. Research today has changed. Increasingly, it is not done by one academic sitting in a laboratory alone, but delivered through networks of collaboration—
between different disciplines, between academia and industry, and between people in different countries. As the Government point out in their industrial strategy, some of our closest research relationships and collaborations are with EU member states.

The UK was at the forefront of developing framework programmes for scientific collaboration across Europe. I worked with the Minister's predecessor to deliver the latest framework project, Horizon 2020. That programme has helped British scientists to work with European scientists to make real advances on issues that affect us all, such as healthcare, environmental research and food security. These matters affect all our lives today, and the work will continue to make the world a better place.

More British-based scientists hold grants from the European Research Council than scientists from any other country. It is absolutely in our national interest to make it easy for our researchers to continue to work with others. As I was getting up this morning, I was delighted to hear Sir Mark Walport talking on the radio about the Rutherford research fellowships because they will continue to ensure that international talent comes here. It is not only the top universities that benefit from these exchanges. The top universities can apply for many other grants, and it is in fact places such as Anglia Ruskin University in my constituency that benefit, as more than three quarters of its funding has come from EU-funded programmes.

It is really good that the Prime Minister has made an early commitment to continue forming a long-term partnership with the EU in its next programme. The European Commission has just launched its draft proposals for Horizon Europe—a seven-year investment programme that could be worth in excess of €100 billion. We want to continue to participate, and I am delighted to hear that the feeling appears to be mutual. This week, German research organisations of the Max Planck Institute stated that they believe that European research is better when they have Brits working alongside them.

The Minister is rolling up his sleeves to ensure that we keep Erasmus, we keep the “+”, we keep the students, and we keep the science co-operation. That is in the interests of not only Britain but Europe, our students and the long-term future of the world.

4.13 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is an pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing the debate. It is an honour to follow two Members who have played such a pivotal part in the scheme, which is valued by students in the UK and around the world.

We have heard what the programme has done for 9 million students all over the world since it started. It builds independence, life skills and an appreciation of international cultures. Moreover, when UK students take part in these programmes overseas, they project our values around the world, which is something that we should surely all welcome.

I will quote my son, who has taken part in Erasmus programmes in Germany. He puts it better than I do, in the way that young people do, when he says:

"I have had an enormous amount of language exposure over Erasmus schemes which have meant that my retention of German is incredible even now years afterwards. Living in a language ingrains it. It makes almost no sense to learn language without the degree of cultural and linguistic exposure Erasmus provides. Alongside language learning the schemes teach independence, mental resilience and social skills, which are difficult to teach in the classroom."

He concludes by saying:

"In an increasingly divided world education should teach the plethora of cultural and international values which Erasmus experiences foster."

I think I should probably get him to write all my speeches, actually—he does a pretty good job. That is a very clear testament to the value of Erasmus. I remember him at the ages of 15 and 16 coming back and telling me of his fantastic experiences.

While I warmly welcome and endorse the words of colleagues with regard to seeing this programme taken forward by the Government post-Brexit, I want to raise the slight concern of how the programme reaches out more effectively to more disadvantaged communities. In Redditch, we have no university, unlike the constituencies of some Members in the Chamber. We have a university in Worcester, but we do not have one in our town, and I fear that young people in Redditch might be missing out. I would like to hear from the Minister—today or at a later date—what Erasmus can do more actively to reach out and champion these values beyond privileged parents like me who will push my kids to do these things, as that will benefit the most disadvantaged societies.

Part of my constituency is Wyche, which has one of the lowest indicators of social mobility in the country. That is quite surprising, because it is a relatively wealthy area of Worcestershire, but it is nevertheless the case. I am working hard to raise aspirations across my constituency through some of my work to bring in more mentors to work with young people, and by encouraging businesses in my constituency to sign up to the social mobility pledge championed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and others. That is part of an overall push to help young people to benefit from these incredible experiences that their more privileged counterparts would perhaps take for granted. That is a very important aspect of this debate, and I am glad to have the chance to raise it.

I am interested to note that the Erasmus scheme is looking to reach out beyond our European partners. That is a welcome angle to the scheme, because we live in an increasingly globalised world, and it is really important that our young people have these opportunities.

Jim Shannon: Just to emphasise the international element of all this, Queen’s University Belfast’s education strategy for 2016 to 2021 outlines its commitment to increase the number of international students who choose to study there. It also aims to increase the number of such students by 10% annually. That is an example of Queen’s University Belfast in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, doing the very same thing.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman and congratulate the university on its work in that regard.

Yesterday we saw the historic passing of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. With that legislation on our statute book, we can, thankfully, proceed to the next stage of EU negotiations. I am absolutely sure that our Prime Minister will want to include this very important
programme in her negotiations. I absolutely and whole-heartedly welcome the fact that we have come together as a Parliament and passed that Bill so that she can get on with that. I add my voice to those who call for her to include this programme in the negotiations.

I want the Government to continue to step up on the wider agenda of raising aspiration, not only through programmes such as Erasmus, but through their other work across this whole policy space. For example, the National Citizen Service, which has been alluded to, is an excellent programme that I have seen young people benefit from. It is a fantastic example of what this Government are doing generally to help young people benefit and develop themselves. Schemes such as Erasmus are a great testament to our British values and something to be welcomed. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about his plans.

4.19 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) again for securing this important debate about the future of Erasmus. He and I were both on a question time panel at our county’s university, the University of Sussex, and I know he has a great knowledge of and passion for this subject.

I too have a positive passion for the ability of not just students but those involved in education to learn abroad and for us to reciprocate, because we learn hugely from those who come from abroad to study or work here. It is a vital cog in our ability to maintain relations, to develop and to learn from other countries. I am absolutely on the side of ensuring that the UK continues to participate in the Erasmus scheme in the next seven-year block.

I maintain that it is vital for all people—not just young people—to go and have that taste abroad and to develop their language skills. The statistics undoubtedly show that people are more likely to succeed in the workplace, with the responsibilities they will be given, if they have such an opportunity. I am passionate about ensuring that we continue to participate in the scheme, and I was heartened by the Prime Minister’s recent speech in which she talked about the importance of continuing with our education networks and partnerships across Europe. There is no reason to believe that we will do anything but continue in that way.

I am, however, slightly concerned about the ongoing cost, as I said to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown. To a certain extent, this is a bit of an indicator of why perhaps people in this country have fallen out of love with the European project, as it were. For a scheme—it has become Erasmus+ and already been widened to cover training, apprenticeships and even job seeking—to go from a cost of €15 billion to €30 billion is quite extraordinary. That was why I asked the hon. Gentleman what the scheme was being expanded in scope towards.

Vicky Ford: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman: I will just finish this point. I understand the point that there is lots more we could fund, but unfortunately we have run out of funding. We have the same issue with funding many of our own projects in this country. It is the mentality of the European Union that you can just double the budget in one period, that causes concern about our ability to continue to fund that budget.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I seem to have stirred the hornets’ nest. I will give way to my hon. Friend first.

Vicky Ford: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that money needs to be well spent and that sometimes the EU has not spent its pennies quite as carefully as we have done. However, Universities UK wants us to double the number of young people who take part in these programmes because of the benefits and because so few do at the moment. Does he agree that, if we are to double the number taking part, we need to increase the resources?

Huw Merriman: I do indeed, and without turning this into a wider universities debate, this is similar to the debate about doubling the number of students, how we fund that and how we then look students in the eye when it comes to their tuition fees. I acknowledge, of course, that these students bring funding over, so my argument is not a brilliant one, and I am sure the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is about to tell me the same thing.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, as we are all agreed here, about the huge added value of sending people abroad, and young people particularly? It exposes them to different communities and countries and allows them to gain experience. There is also the money that goes into scientific projects. The University of Bath in my constituency is involved in engineering and science projects that are funded through these streams. It is about not just the individual student being funded but wider co-operation across the European Union. For that reason, does he agree that it is money well spent?

Huw Merriman: I do agree. The point I am trying to make is that there is an analogy between the views in this country about the European project and costs continuing to grow. As I say, no one has any issue with costs increasing because the programme expands, but to double it from €15 billion to €30 billion at a time when money is incredibly tight not just in this country but across Europe makes me wonder whether the European Commission has quite understood what many of its citizens feel is an issue.

Let us move on because I actually wish to be positive and come to the reasons why I am not as pessimistic as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown about our future participation in the scheme. Again, for me, it comes down to the numbers. It is absolutely clear that the UK is an attractive destination for the 33 participating members of and the 160 partners in Erasmus, because 30,000 students per year are coming to the UK, whereas we are sending 10,000 over in return. We are seventh in the league table of the number of students participating. Turkey—I remind the hon. Gentleman that it is not of course a member of the EU, but it is still a member...
of Erasmus—is one place ahead of us, in sixth place, in terms of the number of students it places. France sends 7,500 students to the UK each year. The UK sends 2,300 to France. Germany sends 5,000 to this country. We send only 1,300 to Germany. Spain sends just short of 5,000 here and we send just over 2,000 UK students to Spain.

The point I am trying to make is that this is a very attractive option for European citizens, and they will not want their right to come to study in the UK to be fettered. That was the point I was trying to make to the hon. Gentleman. There should be a great desire on the part of the European Commission and European Union members to ensure that the UK remains part of this scheme. Therefore, I dare to venture the point that we have a very good hand when it comes to the negotiations. I take the point that we should be getting on with it, but I am one of those Members who finds that point a little rich, given that MPs spend so much time in this Chamber making it very difficult for Ministers to actually get on with it and help us leave the European Union on these terms. MPs trying to make it as difficult as possible by constantly dragging their heels.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I just want to make it clear that, when I am asking the Minister to negotiate details to allow us to sign on, I am not referring to the Brexit negotiations. There is a totally separate and parallel negotiation going on in the whole of Europe about the future of Erasmus post 2020. I am just trying to ensure that the Minister is negotiating, so that we can sign on without a huge negotiation on Brexit. That is the distinction I am worried about.

**Huw Merriman:** The hon. Gentleman may be on to something. We know that the Erasmus programme is maintained by the European Commission. He will want to make sure that, if we do leave the European Union—I absolutely believe we will do so and he may reluctantly agree with me—we get an absolutely superb deal for all UK citizens. Therefore, to a certain extent, rather than actually giving away one of our good hands—our participation in the Erasmus programme, which so many students from the other 27 member states want to take part in—we should wrap it up to ensure that we get good terms in other matters. If we throw away our best cards, we may suffer in other areas where we do not have such a great export.

I will wrap up because it is important to hear the Front-Bench contributions, but I want to make the point again that I am hugely supportive of the scheme. It has delivered huge benefits not just for us, but for our partners abroad. I want to continue it, not least because it sends out the absolutely correct message that, while we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe or ending our relations with Europe. If anything, we need to cement those relations because we are leaving the European Union. There are very good and optimistic reasons why we continue to remain a member of Erasmus, but perhaps not with the costs getting out of control.

4.28 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I very much thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is a very useful and timely debate for us to have. It has obviously created a lot of interest. I have been contacted by the National Union of Students, the British Council and Universities Scotland, which are all lobbying for the scheme to be kept because they see its importance.

Before I get into my comments, I will briefly take issue with what the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said about the doubling of the scheme’s cost. The cost of the scheme is going to increase if the number of participants doubles. That is just how it is. It is not that the costs have spiralled out of control; the scheme is looking to increase the number of participants and to widen the type of participants involved in the scheme, which is really positive.

One thing that the House of Commons and the UK Government—not just this Government, but previous Governments—do not do particularly well is evaluate schemes to see how effective they have been, before deciding whether to take them forward. The Erasmus+ scheme has been incredibly effective and made a huge difference to people’s lives. I therefore understand why people are looking to increase the number of participants, so that more people can benefit from it.

In 2017, the Erasmus+ scheme was worth £21 million to Scotland. Daniel Evans from West Lothan College said that it was “life changing” and had made a huge difference to people’s lives. The effect of the scheme on individual participants is important, and Daniel Evans made the case that the scheme makes a really positive difference, particularly for the most disadvantaged students.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): As is well known I represent the constituency of Stirling, which is home to the world-renowned University of Stirling. The university benefits enormously from Erasmus+. The hon. Lady is describing the benefit of the scheme for its participants, but one point that was put forcefully to me by the university is that the whole university community benefits from the presence on campus, and in tutorials and lecture theatres, of more than 100 international students who come to Stirling under that programme.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I will come on to talk about those wider benefits. I will talk particularly about Aberdeen, but also the wider Scottish context.

In 2015, 2,098 students from Scottish higher education institutions travelled abroad—a huge number of students had that opportunity. Around 200 students a year from Aberdeen University get involved in the Erasmus+ scheme, and 350 students come to Aberdeen and become part of our university life. Aberdeen has the highest percentage of students who are EU nationals of any Scottish university, which make up a significant proportion within Scotland. Those EU nationals have shaped the university in my constituency, and made a huge difference. Indeed, 25% of people who live in Aberdeen city were not born in the UK, and a big reason for that is the number of students who come to both our universities—Aberdeen University and Robert Gordon University in the south of the city.

Scotland has much higher levels of participation in Erasmus+ than other parts of the United Kingdom, and 9.7% of students from Scottish institutions travel abroad. More than half of outward student mobility in
Scotland is accounted for by the Erasmus+ scheme, so I cannot overstate how important it is. In England, fewer than 7% of students take time to travel abroad, so the scheme is particularly important for Scotland.

It is therefore important that we receive clarity. It is good that the UK Government have committed to participating in the scheme until the end of the current funding round, but universities need clarity now about whether they will be able to participate beyond that, so that they can plan for the future. Universities are looking at their courses and numbers of students who will go there in future years, and that clarity will make a huge difference.

Let me move on to the wider benefits of the scheme. Some 93% of learners agree that they see the value of different cultures after having participated in the Erasmus+ scheme, which is hugely important. If the UK Government wish to pursue a global Britain agenda—that is despite shutting us off from Europe in many ways that I would prefer they did not do—we need young people who are taking part in life in our universities to be able to travel, participate in and see the value of different cultures, and to make those links. The reality, however, will be more difficult.

Jim Shannon: One thing that came out of the information we all received was that 64% of employers considered an international experience important for recruitment, and that was up by 37% since 2006. If any evidence were needed to reinforce what the hon. Lady is saying, that is it.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. Earlier we heard the statistics for students who are unemployed, and how low those numbers are for students who have studied abroad when compared with those who have not. That is incredibly important.

We need to make sure that we increase our links with the rest of the world, not decrease them. When our brightest and best students take part in the life of universities across Europe, they showcase the talent we have in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are able to receive the brightest and best students from other places so they can study in our universities. I have discussed this with Aberdeen University. The students who come to study in Aberdeen go back to their country and continue to have links with companies in our constituencies and our cities. They keep up the links they make, which has a huge positive economic benefit. Being part of the scheme is incredibly important.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I recently met Emma Shottie, the president-elect of the student association of the University of the West of Scotland. She spoke not only about the benefits for Scottish students using Erasmus as an opportunity to study overseas, but how it internationalises campuses, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) alluded to earlier. Not only does it enrich our campuses, but our local communities. For that reason alone, Erasmus has to continue after Brexit.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. Aberdeen is an international city shaped by its two universities. They have made a really positive difference to our city.

It is very important to have this debate now, because universities need clarity as soon as possible. It is all well and good for the Government to say that European countries have an interest in us continuing in the scheme, but we need to make it clear how strong our interest is in continuing in the scheme. We need to make it clear that we absolutely want to continue to participate in it going forward. The more the Government can do to state that case, the better for our universities, our students and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, our communities.

4.36 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing this debate and in showing that he—like the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), whose speech I greatly enjoyed—has an honourable place in the progress and expansion of Erasmus benefits. I think that everything he said struck a chord with Members from across the House. One point that my hon. Friend made, unlike the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—I enjoyed his speech, but he seemed to have a rather curious view of the concept of parliamentary scrutiny—was on detail and I want to emphasise that point to the Minister. The devil, as the Minister will know, is in the detail. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the superb way in which he put forward his case. I congratulate the hon. Members for Chelmsford, for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Bexhill and Battle on the positive points they made—in particular, the personal observations made by the hon. Member for Redditch—and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on the pertinent remarks she has just made.

There are continuing misconceptions that Erasmus+ is just a higher education programme. In fact, it is open to education, training, youth and sports organisations across all sectors of lifelong learning, including school, further and higher education for both the adult and youth sectors. It took on that wider field in 2014, making it all the more important that we should fight for it to be continued in a post-Brexit world. Erasmus+ is unique in that it provides additional funding for both disadvantaged and disabled students. It allows low-income UK students, who may not otherwise be able to afford to go abroad without financial assistance, the opportunity to study. It provides them with a fee waiver and a grant for living expenses.

Social mobility, widening participation and encouraging social inclusion are key elements of the programme. As the Russell Group observed in its latest briefing on Erasmus, most Russell Group universities are able to offer supplementary grants specifically for disadvantaged students to undertake an Erasmus+ placement. MillionPlus says that modern universities educate the vast majority of students from areas of the country with the lowest participation in higher education. Schemes such as Erasmus+ are therefore particularly important. It makes the point that EU students in the UK, as well as UK students in Europe, are an enormous benefit to this country and may be even more significant post Brexit, as the UK reshapes its relationships with these nations. The National Union of Students also made the point in its briefing that the opportunity for transnational education, including Erasmus+, benefits students...UK education...local communities and the UK economy.
The Confederation of British Industry has produced clear evidence that the UK workforce requires more graduates with international cultural awareness and, as Members have said today, foreign language skills. The need for these skills will become even more important after we leave the European Union, so it is vital that we do not take those opportunities away from the future workforce. There is also very strong evidence that student exchange programmes can have a beneficial impact, particularly on black and minority ethnic students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Erasmus+ also offers young people the opportunity to develop the enabling skills that translate into the workforce and every aspect of their life. The UK is currently rated one of the world’s leading soft powers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the UK has been in the top three EU countries in terms of numbers participating and EU students coming here.

I do not think we should ever underestimate the importance of that soft power. Last month, I was in Georgia—not Georgia, US, but Georgia, Caucasus—for the 100th anniversary of its independence. I went to universities and met a group of Chevening students from Georgia. As Members will know, Chevening students come here and participate in not dissimilar ways to Erasmus+. Their affection for the UK was palpable. Only last week, one of those same Chevening scholars—alumni, I should say—who had been at that meeting with the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and me in Tbilisi, led a trade delegation to this House for us to expand our trade with Georgia. That is an example of where that soft power can work.

Such programmes offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to challenge themselves and develop as individuals, and that is why they play such a beneficial role in boosting the skills of the UK workforce. We will need that to develop the workforce of tomorrow. Research commissioned by the Local Government Association reveals that the skills gap is worsening. It states that by 2024, there will be more than 4 million too few high-skilled people to take up the available jobs, 2 million too many with intermediate skills, and more than 6 million too many low-skilled people. That is why the Government cannot afford to dither and allow participation in Erasmus+ to lapse.

The importance of Erasmus+ was recognised, as we have heard, through the EU Commission’s proposals for the new expanded programme. Doubling the funding does indeed enable the EU to support 12 million people and every aspect of their life. The UK is currently rated one of the world’s leading soft powers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the UK has been in the top three EU countries in terms of numbers participating and EU students coming here.

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It is important to note—my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown touched on this today and in a previous Adjournment debate—that this funding includes a number of the statistics that have been shared across the Chamber today and has played a crucial part in administering and promoting the Erasmus programme. It has also had a vital role in presenting evidence of the beneficial outcomes to Government. Anyone who saw the excellent Erasmus+ Shaping Futures exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall in February, which helped to lay out the clear advantages through personal case histories, will know what I mean.

Alongside an array of higher and further education stakeholders, we have consistently pressed the Government on this issue, during the negotiations on the phase 1 agreement and during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. We tabled amendments to the Bill, both here and in the other place.

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Gordon Marsden: Very briefly.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman speaks forcefully about the need to retain Erasmus+, and also, I presume, ongoing co-operation in science. Does he not agree, however, that if we are to continue to participate in Horizon Europe, which will cost the British taxpayer many billions of pounds, we must have more than just third-country status? We must also have a say in how the programmes are structured.

Gordon Marsden: That is a very good point, although it might be better directed at the Minister rather than the shadow Minister. I agree that we need a rigorous debate on the subject.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, it was not until November, in a letter to my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), that the Government made a commitment to continuing participation in the Erasmus+ scheme until the end of the current EU funding cycle, and spelt out some of the details. That letter did not in any way answer our questions about our participation in the new expanded Erasmus+, which will be so beneficial to social mobility, and which will begin in 2021.

I therefore pressed the Prime Minister during Prime Minister’s Question Time, asking whether she would ensure that Erasmus+ was “now a top-line item for her Ministers” in the continuing negotiations. I was disappointed by her answer, which was non-committal. She merely 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.”—[Official Report, 16 May 2018, Vol. 641, c. 277.]
On that occasion, Mrs May said “may”, but as parliamentary draftsmen will know, “may” is not the same as “would” or “want”.

We continue to believe that it is imperative for future involvement in this programme to be on the agenda, and to be explicit in the Brexit guidelines. The Government must ensure that Ministers in the Departments for Education, for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Culture, Media and Sport are involved in the negotiations, and ensure that it is clear that Erasmus+ is a key part of that agenda. I do not doubt for a minute the commitment of the Universities Minister, but I want to see him, if not actually at the table, as close to it as possible, and whispering in the ears of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Erasmus+ is every bit as important to the future of our country, and to our young and our older people, as Horizon, or the money from EU structural funds that will be lost to higher and further education, on which the prosperity fund—a slightly Orwellian title—has yet to comment. As the Russell Group has said, maintaining our membership of the programme is likely to be less costly than an attempt by universities to replicate it, either on a bilateral basis or through the European University Association. It would be very difficult to replicate via a national scheme.

Since the phase 1 negotiations the Government have had opportunities to express a stronger commitment to Erasmus+. I have met members of the European Commission twice, and have raised the implications of Brexit for our higher and further education and skills. Everyone to whom I have spoken has agreed that it is a key part of that agenda. I do not doubt for a minute the commitment of the Universities Minister, but I want to see him, if not actually at the table, as close to it as possible, and whispering in the ears of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

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Since the phase 1 negotiations the Government have had opportunities to express a stronger commitment to Erasmus+. I have met members of the European Commission twice, and have raised the implications of Brexit for our higher and further education and skills. Everyone to whom I have spoken has agreed that it is a benefit to both the EU and the UK. It is not just a glorified twinning experience. If the Government are in benefit to both the EU and the UK. It is not just a glorified twinning experience. If the Government are in

I think about what we can do through the Erasmus programme in the EU and everything else: it is not just about the EU or other programmes. On that note, it is worth putting on the record the British Council’s great work over decades at the forefront of promoting opportunities for international education co-operation, not just in higher education but through initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms and school-linking programmes. The Government were also pleased to support the Go International: Stand Out campaign launched by Universities UK International in 2017 to encourage young people to experience studying, working and volunteering abroad. Last December we also announced the expansion of the Generation UK-China scheme, giving more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to take up internships in China each year. So as we move towards our exit from the EU, the Government will continue to develop education co-operation as a key part of our international agenda.

The motion before the House is specifically on Erasmus+, however, and we recognise that over the past 30 years the programme has played an important role in achieving some tremendous outcomes. From the start of the current programme there have been successful projects across all the programme’s key actions in education, youth and sport. About 12,000 young people and 4,000 youth workers participate each year, with the latter benefiting from job attachments, training and other professional development activities. We know the benefits: young people learn new skills for life and work, get the opportunity to work with their European peers, and broaden their cultural horizons. According to statistics compiled by the UK National Agency in 2016 some 31,000 higher education students and 4,000 higher education staff came to the UK under the Erasmus+ programme. So the Government are pleased that under the agreement made on 8 December 2017 the UK will continue to participate in the Erasmus+ programme until the end of 2020, providing clarity and certainty to students and institutions.

I will now turn to the question for this debate: our participation in the next Erasmus programme. As the Prime Minister said, this is a matter for negotiations on the future relationship with the EU, but although we do not want to pre-empt those negotiations, I would like to reassure Members that the Government are looking very carefully at the Commission’s proposals published on 30 May. We will discuss with the EU the options for future participation as a third country, as the Prime Minister has made clear, on the basis of a fair and ongoing contribution. So we have accepted that we will want the option to participate and we know we must pay into the programme, but obviously we want the contribution to be fair and we will have to negotiate the terms. As the Prime Minister has also said, it is in the UK’s and the EU’s mutual interests to engage on issues relating to the design of the programmes developed under the next multiannual financial framework, or MFF. We want to contribute our ideas as the thinking on the next MFF and Erasmus programme develops over the coming months and as the details are discussed and negotiated in Brussels and EU capitals. Those details are important, and we have been successful in the new proposal contains a number of provisions that the UK can welcome.

First, therefore, I give Members across the House the reassurance that we are actively engaged in the discussions on the design of the programme and we have made the
EU aware of our desire to participate in the programme, and there is a lot to welcome in the framework proposals. We support, therefore, the decision to build on the success of Erasmus+ and to retain the basic structure of the programme and its key actions focusing on mobility and partnerships across the education, youth and sport sectors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch made a valuable point about how wide the net is cast as far as participation in Erasmus+ is concerned. It is welcome that the proposals recognise the central position of the higher education sector while including the opportunity to do more in vocational education and training and school exchanges, so we welcome that breadth of scope.

We note and support the increased focus on building stronger relations with the rest of the world through mobility and co-operation with third countries around the globe. Similarly, the emphasis on widening access across all social groups aligns strongly with the Government’s commitment to ensuring that all children and young people have the best chance to realise their potential through international opportunities. The proposal contains several new ideas, such as those on the development of a European education area, European universities and support for more general cultural and educational opportunities for young people, and we will consider them on their merits as the negotiations proceed.

In summary, the Commission’s proposals offer a good basis for the Government to discuss with the Commission how the UK may be able to participate in the future. It is helpful that the proposal offers scope for a bilateral agreement with third countries, and we look forward to discussing the details. We will look carefully at all the different elements of the programme and how they align with the UK’s interests and priorities in this area, and we are engaging actively with the Commission and other EU member states. For example, when I attended the European Higher Education Area ministerial conference in Paris last month, I had a constructive discussion with the EU education commissioner on potential options for UK participation, so I hope that that reassures the hon. Member for Blackpool South that I am engaging not just with our officials, but the Commission’s officials on this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle made another valuable point about the size of the budget and about continuing to consider the size of the programme to ensure that our contribution offers value for money, which is vital. We obviously note the proposal for the budget to be doubled, so we need to discuss our participation based on a sensible and hard-headed assessment of the UK’s priorities and the substantial benefit to the EU should the UK decided to participate.

We are focused on that, and I am encouraged by the wording in the regulation on financial contributions, which refers to a “fair balance as regards the contributions and benefits of the third country participating”.

To make our intentions clear to our European partners, I have spent a lot of time talking to almost every member state’s Education Minister over the past month or so, and I have met several of them in person. They have all expressed not only the hope that the UK will decide to participate, but the importance that they attach to education exchanges with the UK. Through those discussions, we will make sure that that the UK achieves the best possible outcome for its students and institutions, ensuring that we build upon our status as an internationalist and global nation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown for their sterling work over the years before they arrived in this House to make the programme the success that it has been.

This has been a good debate. We are very much in the early stages of the negotiations.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Just before the Minister concludes, I want to add my support to the comments of the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) about our continuing participation in Horizon 2020 and ensuring collaboration between institutions.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to give an assurance on that. Horizon Europe is the successor programme to Horizon 2020, and we have made clear our desire to participate in it and there is a lot to consider in the new framework guidelines. The key point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford raised, is that it is a big programme, and the UK would make a multi-billion pound contribution if we were to be a part of the programme. We want the programme to focus on excellence—that is what science is about, and we do not want excellence to be capped—but we also want influence, because we will be putting more into the programme than all the other potential associate members combined.

5 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,
That the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill be referred to a Second Reading Committee.—(Craig Whittaker.)
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Craig Whittaker.] 

5 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I sought to secure this Adjournment debate due to my desperate frustration 20 months on from the Government’s decision to close both Halifax county and family court, and Calderdale magistrates court, in October 2016. When the court closures were first proposed in 2015, I joined local magistrates to campaign for a merger of the two courts, which would have delivered a cost saving to Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service while maintaining court provision and access to justice locally.

I met the then Minister responsible for courts, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Varah)—I think that the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) did the same—to outline our case. I also wrote a letter to the then Secretary of State for Justice that was co-signed by 18 local law firms, the leader of Calderdale Council, the chief executive officer of WomenCentre and the Halifax Law Society, but to no avail, as the courts closed the following year. I then sought to press the Government for alternatives, having listened carefully to their suggestion that old-fashioned court buildings were actually a barrier to justice, and that their closure would instead facilitate a revolution in access to justice, enabled by the roll-out of a variety of new technologies.

After visiting Kent police’s remote justice scheme to see the good work going on there, I attempted to help shape the process as a member of the Public Bill Committee that considered the Prisons and Courts Bill in 2017. However, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), will be aware that that Bill was dropped following the announcement of the snap general election in June 2017.

I held further discussions with the then Minister responsible, the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), and he arranged for me to meet the chief executive of Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service, Susan Acland-Hood, in July 2017. She understood my concern and confirmed that Halifax would get a video link to mitigate the impact of the court closures.

Sadly, a year on, I am aware of no progress. I want to outline my concern that, far from technology allowing access to justice locally.

As it stands, access to justice is undeniably significantly worse in Calderdale since the court closures—I will outline why. West Yorkshire police officers working in the Calderdale district have been clear that, at a time when resources are stretched and demand has to be carefully managed, the increased burden created by officers and staff travelling further to give evidence, to secure warrants and to transport prisoners is placing yet another strain—one that was entirely avoidable—on resources.

I can only imagine that a similar impact has been felt by police forces in other areas across the country where courts have closed. I say I can “only imagine” because, having asked about this issue in a series of written parliamentary questions, it seems that no impact assessment has been carried out at either a national or a local level.

Although I have been informed that the Secretary of State for Justice has not specifically discussed with the Home Secretary the potential additional financial costs for police forces in areas where the local court has recently closed, it was explained to me that police forces could have made submissions to the public consultations prior to the court closures. There has been no impact assessment or even discussion since that point.

The police have also informed me that the reduced footprint of the justice system is having a particular impact on domestic violence prosecutions. A recent domestic violence charge was scheduled to be heard in February 2019, which will fall just short of the victim facing a 12-month wait for the case to be heard.

Further to that, when I asked the Minister in a written question how cases that would previously have been heard in Calderdale are now being distributed between the neighbouring courts, I was told that all cases have been transferred to Bradford. Although the commitment from Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service ahead of the court closures was that all work would be transferred to Bradford—10 miles away—and that that court could handle the increased demand, that has not happened from the very start, as cases are being heard in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield. It worries me that the Ministry of Justice is not across this in its response to written parliamentary questions, because the practical implications are massive and integral to the problems we are facing. Leeds magistrates court is 20 miles away from Halifax town centre, a further 10 miles away from Bradford, which was the subject of consultation.

One consequence of the situation is that it proves much harder to organise independent domestic violence advisers to attend court in order to support victims when those advisers are covering two or more courts simultaneously. Leeds and Huddersfield magistrates courts are 20 miles apart. Given the length of time victims now routinely face to have their cases heard, the instances of cases being lost or dropped due to victims withdrawing support is increasing. Surely we cannot allow this to happen. I asked the Government about the average and longest waiting times for domestic violence cases to be heard, but was informed that the information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost and was therefore not available. Surely the Government need to understand what the impact is. If domestic violence cases are taking a year to be heard, the Government must step in to address the situation and take corrective action, but they first need to know where that is happening, the length of the delays and why they are occurring.

I received the same response when I asked how many cases had been abandoned or dropped in areas where courts had recently closed. I did seek this information, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the failure of both vulnerable victims and defendants to appear in courts

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Court Closures: Calderdale

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Craig Whittaker.]
that are now much further away has resulted in an incredibly disrupted and inefficient system. I understand that for so-called “cracked trials”—those that close unexpectedly—forms have to be completed to specify the reason why. Solicitors and local police tell me that the reason is increasingly because prosecution witnesses and victims fail to turn up in court, which is due in no small part to the distances they have to travel and the periods of time they have to wait before their cases are heard. As the Government are in possession of those forms setting out the reasons why those cases are cracked, may I urge them please to undertake analysis and publish that information, because if we do not get a grip on this, we let victims down and let perpetrators off the hook?

My local officers also make the point that between March 2016 and March 2018 in Calderdale, there has been a 64% increase in the number of arrest warrants issued under the Bail Act 1976 for failure to appear in court—a 64% increase! The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to the council to deliver. That has involved a 64% increase in the number of arrest warrants issued under the Bail Act—a 64% increase! The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to the council to deliver. The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to the council to deliver. The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to the council to deliver. The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to the council to deliver.

Let me turn to the impact on the local authority. Calderdale Council confirms that family cases are being heard across the neighbouring area, with families travelling to Huddersfield, Bradford and Leeds for care proceedings. All emergency orders are heard in court in Leeds, about 20 miles away from Halifax town centre. Families are having to travel much further, as are lawyers, and, significantly for the council, so too are social workers. What was previously an hour or two out of the office for a hearing is now routinely half a day. Like the police, social workers were stretched without this entirely avoidable pull on their time, and the situation has an impact on capacity within the team.

An issue that was raised with me only recently by Trinity Academy Sowerby Bridge, and confirmed by Calderdale Council, is the local authority’s inability to secure court dates to take enforcement action against parents who persistently flout attendance requirements. It is depressing that that might be necessary, and there are some uncomfortable patterns around lack of attendance in the cases outlined to me—that is a debate for another day, Mr Deputy Speaker—but having issued penalty notices to parents that have gone unpaid, the local authority has a statutory responsibility to the school to secure a court date for the case to be heard within a six-month window. These cases are all heard in Bradford, and there is a delay in obtaining court dates due to the volume of hearings being sought between the two councils, Calderdale and Bradford. Calderdale Council informs me that that is having a detrimental effect on its statutory service to schools, leading to a situation in which the backlog of cases in the system is such that it has had to write off a significant number of cases of unpaid penalty notices as it simply cannot secure a court date within the required six-month timescale. The fine therefore goes unpaid but, more worryingly, in some of those cases the child is not going to school for that duration, and the school and the council are powerless to take corrective action due to the court closures.

The youth offending team is also having to adapt, with staff now based at Bradford court, where all the youth cases are heard, despite staff having to drive young people to Bradford on occasion to make sure that they attend. I understand that the YOT feels that attending court can help with behavioural change and convey seriousness to a young person who might be on the wrong path, and I am inclined to agree. The court buildings themselves will always play an important role in the infrastructure of justice provision.

I have discussed the situation with local law firms in Halifax and, disappointingly but unsurprisingly, three firms that specialised in criminal law have relocated since the courts closed. That is jobs and business rates gone from our area. Solicitor Mark Baxendale of Baxendale Vanzie solicitors told me that he is currently working on a case involving a Calderdale man that is being heard at Leeds court, confirming once again that cases are being heard as far as 20 miles from Halifax—not in Bradford as promised, or as suggested in the answer to my written parliamentary question.

My local courts were just two of the 86 courts across England and Wales that were closed in 2016, and an additional eight closures were proposed in January this year. Following my meeting with Susan Acland-Hood, Calderdale Council has had meetings with the Courts and Tribunals Service on the delivery of the commitment to video links in one of the council’s buildings. The latest news that Calderdale heard from the Courts and Tribunals Service was in February—four months ago—when it was told that the technology at the court end was not fit for purpose to accommodate court hearings by video link. Attempts were being made to source alternative technology, but Calderdale Council has received no further updates since then.

In May, I asked the Government how many courts had been closed and replaced with remote video technology since 2015. The answer was that none had been closed and replaced with remote video technology since 2015 but, to “enhance” access to justice, remote video links had been established in six areas where courts had closed since 2015, with a further two video links to be in place by the end of the year. So 86 courts have been closed and video links have been introduced in just six areas affected by those closures since then. I object in the strongest possible terms to the suggestion that this was done to enhance access to justice. Justice gaps have been plugged in just six out of 86 areas; that is not enhancing access to justice, it is decimating it.

I hope that I have left the Minister in no doubt that the provision of justice in Calderdale and the surrounding areas has been dealt a critical blow by the closure of the courts. I would like to see immediate progress on video links, and if the technology is not yet available, court provision should be reinstated until it is. The case load has not been transferred 10 miles to Bradford, as was consulted on, but, in some instances, 20 miles to Leeds. What is being done to address that? It is not what was consulted on and, apparently, it is news to the Ministry of Justice, given its written response. Finally, will the Minister commit to undertaking an analysis of how long it is taking for courts to hear domestic violence trials, and the reasons why so-called cracked trials are collapsing in areas where courts have recently closed? In that way, we will really be able to understand the impact and seek to mitigate it, however and wherever possible.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate. I know that the hon. Member
[Lucy Frazer]

for Halifax (Holly Lynch) is very interested in this issue and has campaigned hard for her constituents. I am aware of how hard she campaigned against the original closure of the courts in Halifax on the basis of travel times and lack of access to justice. I was aware that, as she said, she met the chief executive officer of the Courts and Tribunals Service in July 2017 to discuss opportunities to establish a video link and, as she identified, she has recently asked a number of written parliamentary questions on this topic.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) is present; he, too, campaigned against the closure of the courts in Calderdale. I also see that Mr Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle), is in the Chair; he is campaigning vigorously against the closure of his local court in Chorley and I have met him several times to hear his concerns and those of his constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am awaiting good news.

Lucy Frazer: Before I turn to the particular instances that affect the hon. Lady’s Halifax constituency, it is important to make a number of broad points about access to justice and the courts estate. In every sector, digitalisation is improving access to services, including to public services. Technology has reformed the way that we live our lives and made many processes more efficient. In such circumstances, we ask ourselves whether justice should be immune from digital advancement.

In 2015, the Civil Justice Council wrote a report, stating that online dispute resolution had enormous potential to bring two great benefits to our justice system: a lower-cost court system and an increase in access to justice. The Ministry of Justice is now in the process of improving and upgrading our justice system to bring it up to date in the 21st century.

Technology is not the only answer to any upgrade. The provision of justice depends on people and courts and on lawyers and judges. However, in circumstances in which 41% of courts in 2016-17 were used at less than half of their available hearing capacity; in circumstances in which the money from the proceeds of the sale of a court are put back into the justice system; in circumstances in which we are spending £1 billion on our courts reform programme; and in circumstances in which finances are not unlimited, we do need to ask ourselves where money on the justice system is best spent. It is in that context that the closure of the courts in Calderdale took place.

The closures of the county and magistrates courts were proposed because they were poorly used. For example, in the financial year before the consultation, the magistrates court had been used for 33% of its available hours. Both the magistrates court and the county court were also grade II listed buildings and not fit for purpose. The court consultation resulted in a proposal to move the work to Bradford, where better facilities were available for those using the courts.

The courts were closed only after the Ministry of Justice had consulted and considered carefully the responses and the Lord Chancellor was satisfied that the courts could be closed without compromising access to justice.

The consultation response document stated that the Ministry of Justice would explore the potential for those living in Halifax to give evidence into court remotely from another location in the town. Finding an appropriate IT solution and local venue has taken longer than we had initially hoped, but I am pleased to be able to advise the hon. Lady that arrangements are being put in place to allow witnesses and users, subject to judicial approval, to give evidence via a video link located in the Calderdale council building. The facilities will require some initial testing to make sure that they meet all necessary requirements, but I am told that we will be able to provide this enhancement for those who need to give evidence in court and who are unable to travel to Bradford.

I know that this has taken a long time, and I will identify some of the reasons why that is the case. Initially, it was necessary to find a building. One was identified, but there were problems. The Ministry of Justice then looked at two other buildings: Customer First and the citizens advice bureau. It progressed with Customer First. There was then an issue of incompatible IT, but that issue is now solved. Then it had to bid for funding. It is now working with the judiciary on where the video facility will go in Bradford, but it thinks there will be a solution imminently. Then the IT will have to be installed.

I know that the hon. Lady welcomes video facilities. She mentioned that she was a member of the Prisons and Courts Bill Committee and that she visited Kent police’s video-enabled justice system. I note that she said that she “genuinely welcomed” the move to introduce modern technology into the justice system, so that vulnerable victims can record their evidence just once to save potentially painful and unnecessary repetition; so that we can cut down the time spent by police officers in court; and so that justice can be accessed on an iPad in a front room. She went on to say that such changes would be “fantastic”.

Across the court estate, we have established video link facilities that allow vulnerable victims and witnesses routinely to give evidence without having to be in the same courtroom as the defendant. We have more than 2,000 operational video links, with witness links in magistrates and Crown courts.

On the wider programme of reform, we are making considerable progress. So far, we have delivered high-quality new digital services. For example, 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 their bus fare; and respond to civil money claims. Thousands of people have already used these pilots and received straightforward digital access to the courts for the first time. Public feedback has been extremely positive.

This is not just about efficiency. Offering court and tribunal services online can significantly improve the experience of those using the courts. For example, the rejection rates for paper divorce applications was 40% due to errors and omissions. Since the latest release of the online divorce service, the online application rejection rate is now less than 1%, and surveys show user satisfaction of about 90% for our online services.

The hon. Lady has raised several important and interesting points about the experience in her constituency. She mentioned the particularly important aspect of domestic violence, and I recently held a roundtable with
practitioners in the judiciary and those who use the courts to work out how we can improve the court service for those who have experienced domestic violence. She made several points that I am happy to look into.

I am grateful that we have had an opportunity to debate this important topic today. The Government are investing a significant sum to enhance access to justice, and we will work hard to drive forward the transformation of our courts and tribunals to make sure that we continue to have a justice system that we can be proud of.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 25 June 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—

Special Educational Needs: Support Services

1. Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that children with special educational needs are able to access support services that are close to home. [906000]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Children and young people should receive the right support to meet their special educational needs. In most cases, that can be provided close to home through the schools and services in their local area. Services must be jointly commissioned, with a published local offer kept under regular review.

Anne Marie Morris: Yet 41% of pupils attending special schools in Devon have to travel more than 10 miles to reach their school. How will the Minister support those children in Devon, to ensure that SEN provision is locally available and of a high quality?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. If a local authority identifies a shortage of special school places, resulting in a significant number of children with special educational needs and disabilities having to travel a long way, they need to consider creating or expanding specialist provision. We announced £50 million of funding in May this year, and Devon will receive £2.8 million from 2018 to 2021.

19. [90602] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My mum fought for me to receive a mainstream education, knowing that I, like the majority of children with special educational needs or a disability, would benefit from that. However, in 2016, for the first time in more than 25 years, more children with SEND were educated outside the mainstream education system. In response, the UN raised concerns about an education system that segregates children with disabilities in special schools. What will the Minister do to reverse that concerning trend and instead build a more inclusive education system?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is important that, where councils need further provision to help to maintain children in mainstream education, they are able to create that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Every year, 3,285 children with special needs are excluded from our schools—that is roughly 17 a day—and 833 children with special needs are given fixed-term exclusions. Does my hon. Friend recognise that that is a major social injustice? I know that he has his review, but surely the Department’s priority must be to address that.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Education Committee for that question. I do recognise that, which is why the Government have announced an exclusions review, led by Ed Timpson.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Further to the previous question, what are the Government doing to address the issue of academies excluding people with special educational needs, which is contributing to the rise in exclusions?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are looking at different groups and the proportion of those being excluded, which I hope will come out through the Timpson exclusions review. We are also talking to Ofsted about the issue of off-rolling.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Some 1.4 million children in this country display some kind of speech, language or communication disorder. That is 10% of children, as was highlighted recently in the excellent Bercow report, the second one on this. Given that children entering school with lower than expected communication skills tend to do less well academically and feature more highly among excluded children and young offenders, can the Minister give an indication of how the recommendations in the Bercow report might be implemented in our education system?

Nadhim Zahawi: I spoke at the launch of the—

Mr Speaker: Ten years on.

Nadhim Zahawi: Ten years on from the Bercow review; I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. We are looking very carefully at the recommendations of that report. One thing we are already doing is working with Public Health England to ensure that the health workers who go to see parents at that crucial young stage are trained in speech and language therapy.

Children’s Academic and Practical Skills

2. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that all children have continuing opportunities to develop academic and practical skills.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Schools must provide a broad and balanced curriculum that prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

Mr Sheerman: The team on the Front Bench could not beat Panama or any other country in terms of effort and talent. Is not it a fact that the earlier young children are able to use both their academic and technical skills, the better, and that this Government have cramped the
curriculum? Is not it also true that we can only deliver T-levels with the support of the further education sector, which is being destroyed by Government policies and underfunding?

**Damian Hinds:** In a wide-ranging question, as they say, the hon. Gentleman presents a number of different aspects, ranging from the World cup to T-levels. He is right about one thing, and that is that the earlier children acquire skills and knowledge the better. That is why it is so important we have managed to narrow the attainment gap both in the early years and in primary school.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): May I welcome the advances the Government have achieved in this field and my right hon. Friend's positive approach, contrary to what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said? What more can be done to tackle the skills shortage in the construction sector?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point about the construction sector, and of course we have considerable requirements because of the need to accelerate residential development. One of the first T-levels will be in construction, and we are working closely with the sector to bring that on.

**Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): Is the Secretary of State aware of the concern in the creative industries about the contraction in the number of pupils in maintained schools studying performing arts, and how does he intend to address that problem?

**Damian Hinds:** The right hon. Gentleman is correct about the importance of the performing arts. In fact, the number of children taking a GCSE in arts subjects has not really moved very much, but we very much believe in a broad and balanced curriculum, with the breadth of opportunities he would want.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Ind): In the funding of these opportunities, where an academy runs up a debt because of the Department's failure to supervise the academy sponsor, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Department should take responsibility for that debt, rather than leave it with the school, as appears to be the case with the Goodwin Academy in my constituency?

**Damian Hinds:** Where it does become necessary to re-broker an academy, as it does on occasions—my hon. Friend and I have had an opportunity to meet to discuss this—there is a bespoke approach to make sure that the settlement for the new arrangement with the new trust is sustainable.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Heads have recently warned that the new GCSEs are "inhumane" and that the "collateral damage", as they call it, will be the less able pupils. Given that the Health and Social Care and the Education Committees recently found that one of the top causes of child mental ill health is the new exam regime, when will the right hon. Gentleman's Department take action to assess the impact of the new GCSEs, and will he ensure that private schools that are opting out of the new GCSEs at the moment will be forced to take them as well?

**Damian Hinds:** We take the mental health of children and young people extremely seriously; hence the recent Green Paper and the whole programme of activity. To be fair, I do not think that the concept of exam stress is entirely a new one, and at this time of year there obviously is heightened stress among some young people. But the new GCSEs and A-levels have been designed and benchmarked against the leading systems in the world to make sure that we have a leading exam and qualification system.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Whether it is for academic or practical skills, reading and literacy are vital. In contrast to the hon. Member for Huddersfield, does the Secretary of State welcome the fact that pupils in England are outperforming their peers right across the world when it comes to reading and literacy, according to the latest PIRLS—the progress in international reading literacy study—figures?

**Damian Hinds:** I very much welcome that. It has been very encouraging to see how, particularly through the focus on the phonics programme, our young readers have improved in their reading so much, and that is reflected in those international comparisons.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): The two colleges serving my own constituents are both suffering severe financial pressures. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield is absolutely right: further education is fundamental to providing ongoing education in both practical and academic skills. When are the Government going to look at FE in general and particularly at the two colleges serving my constituency?

**Damian Hinds:** There are of course two enormous programmes of benefit to FE colleges. First, there is the apprenticeships programme. Through the levy, the total funding for apprenticeships by the end of this decade will be double what it was at the beginning. The other programme—the hon. Member for Huddersfield and I touched on this briefly—is T-levels, which will bring another half a billion pounds of funding.

**Social Work Profession**

3. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening the social work profession.

**The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):** The crucial role of social workers should be recognised and celebrated. We are improving initial education standards and providing professional development. We have established an independent regulator, focusing on better standards.

**Alex Burghart:** As the Secretary of State will know, one of the reasons that we need to improve the quality of social workers in our country is to ensure that children in care can move on into employment and further education. Can he outline what more the Government are going to do to ensure that those children get the support they need?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the importance and challenge of that transition. Care leavers can access a personal adviser until they are 25. They can get a £2,000 bursary if they are in higher education,
and a 16-to-19 bursary of up to £1,200 from the college if in further education. Care leavers aged 16 to 24 can receive a £1,000 bursary in the first year of an apprenticeship.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The Department’s own figures show a gap of over 10,000 in the overall children’s social care workforce. Unison analysis shows that children’s services have experienced a funding shortfall of £600 million, with more cuts to come. Will the Secretary of State explain why he is happy to see hundreds of millions of pounds cut from vulnerable children, yet he is outsourcing £73 million to train as few as 700 new social workers and introduce an unpopular accreditation scheme?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is right to identify the importance of funding and resourcing for children’s social work. The spend on the most vulnerable children has been going up. There are some 35,000 child and family social workers and that number has increased a little between 2016 and 2017.

Care Crisis Review

4. Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of the recommendations for his Department in the Family Rights Group report, “Care Crisis Review: Options for Change”, published in June 2018; and what discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on that report.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I am grateful for that question. We have two programmes: first, the What Works programme in children’s social care and, secondly, a £200 million innovation programme to look at what really works and then scale it up.

Nadhim Zahawi: Thirty hours is a success story. The summer numbers are 340,000 children aged three and four benefiting from 30 hours a week free childcare. For those parents taking advantage of that, that is a £5,000 saving a year. We are conducting a review to look at the economics of the model, as we have done in the past, including to local government, especially children’s social care. Will the Minister read the report from the directors of children’s services, take the action that is needed to end the crisis in children’s social care, and make the priority looking after our most vulnerable children, not tax cuts for the very wealthy?

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Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Does the Minister agree with the basic premise of the care crisis review that, if more money were spent on early intervention and family support, fewer children would go into care, and does he agree that that would be a good thing?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a great advocate of early intervention. She is absolutely right. On top of the £1.4 billion programme for troubled families, the Government are looking at reducing parental conflict. We know that many children in need have suffered from domestic abuse. The landmark Bill that we are bringing forward bears witness to our hard work across government to deliver this. However, she is absolutely right to say that early intervention is important and the Government take that very seriously.

Childcare Settings: Financial Viability

5. Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What assessment has he 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): The rates that we provide to childcare providers were based on the review of childcare costs, which was described as “thorough and wide-ranging” by the National Audit Office. We have recently commissioned new research to further understand providers’ care costs.

Dan Carden: Last week, the National Day Nurseries Association found that nurseries faced an annual deficit of £2,000 per child on the 30 hours of childcare policy. That means that nurseries are struggling financially; a skills shortage as workers quit the sector; and fewer nurseries for parents to send their children to, or more nurseries with under-qualified staff. When will the Minister conduct an honest review of the chaos that he has caused across the sector?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is right. We have listened carefully, including to many views in this Chamber, and we have delivered. As of September, foster carers who qualify for the 30 hours a week free childcare for three and four-year-olds can take advantage of it.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Minister will know that nursery schools, as distinct from nurseries, provide first-class education in deprived areas in the early years. However, their funding is still in doubt beyond 2020. When will the Minister make an
annouacement about these nursery schools and put nursery schools in Wolverhampton, which provide good and outstanding education, on a sure financial footing?

Nadhim Zahawi: There are 402 maintained nursery schools. The hon. Lady has championed their cause and I have seen at first hand the great work they do. She is right that the funding goes up to 2020. Clearly, we have to see what happens, but they are a very important part of the mix of provision.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Childcare is a critical enabler to allow parents to access further education. Nottingham College, in a move reflective of the exceptionally difficult landscape facing further education, has chosen to shut its nursery in my constituency. That is wrong, and I am campaigning with local residents and councillors to keep it open. Does the Minister agree that access to childcare is an important driver of accessing further education?

Nadhim Zahawi: I do agree that access to childcare is very important. I will look at the specific details the hon. Gentleman mentions, but suffice it to say that we are investing £50 million more to help schools to open a nursery setting.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): May I push the Minister further on the report from the National Day Nurseries Association, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden)? Not only is there, as mentioned, an annual funding deficit of £2,000 per 30-hours child, but a third of nurseries are having to limit the funded places they offer and a third of nurseries are being paid late for the work they do. To support our childcare providers, will the Minister tell us how many local authorities will see a real-terms funding increase in the next academic year?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady rightly speaks about the important research by the NDNA. Our own research demonstrates that 80% of providers are willing and able to offer places, and one third have actually increased their places.

Cold Water Shock: Mandatory Teaching

6. Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Whether he plans to include mandatory teaching on cold water shock as part of compulsory swimming and water lessons.

7. Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels.

14. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Whether he plans to include mandatory teaching on cold water shock as part of compulsory swimming and water lessons.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In the new national curriculum, which we introduced in 2014, maintained primary schools are required to teach swimming and water safety. Pupils are required to be taught how to swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres, covering a range of strokes. It also requires pupils to be taught to perform self-rescue in different water-based situations.

Mr Dhesi: No doubt the Minister agrees with the Prime Minister, who told the House last week, when I raised with her the case of Michael Scaife, who tragically drowned in Slough, that she recognises there is more to do on water safety education. The curriculum swimming and water safety recommendations were made nearly a year ago. On this, the last day of the Royal Life Saving Society’s annual Drowning Prevention Week, will the Minister agree to prioritise the implementation of those recommendations?

Nick Gibb: We were all very sorry to hear about the tragic death of Michael Scaife, who drowned while trying to save a friend. The Government take swimming and water safety very seriously, which is why we improved the national curriculum and why we support the National Water Safety Forum’s national drowning prevention strategy. The group the hon. Gentleman refers to published its report in July 2016. We then established an implementation group and the Government are currently reviewing the recommendations that came out of that report.

Mrs Hodgson: The children’s Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—was the founder and the first chair of the all-party group on water safety and drowning prevention. Like me, he had constituents who tragically lost their lives, which was why the group was set up. Ross Irwin in my constituency drowned in Christmas 2016 and two schoolgirls drowned a couple of years previously in the same river, the River Wear. So I know this is an issue very close to the Minister’s heart and a number of colleagues from across the House have had constituents dying in such circumstances. Given that almost a third of all pupils leaving primary school are unable to swim and do not have basic water safety skills, will the Minister make it his personal ambition to ensure that every child leaves school knowing the dangers of open water and cold water shock, as well as knowing how to swim?

Nick Gibb: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work that she has been doing over several years to ensure that children are better informed about the dangers of water and how to be safe in and around it. I thank her for her campaigns and that of the father of Ross Irwin, to whom I also pay tribute. Thanks to the Royal Life Saving Society and Sunderland City Council, there are now improved water safety measures in place at the Fatfield riverside on the River Wear. We take these issues very seriously, which is why we improved the curriculum and why this Government asked an independent group of experts from across the swimming sector to submit an independent report, setting out how we can improve swimming and the swimming curriculum in our schools.

T-levels

7. Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels.

17. Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels.
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We have made good progress. We have announced the providers who will deliver the first three T-levels from 2020. We published the outline content for them, developed by panels of employers, and have begun the process to select an awarding organisation to develop them.

Mr Fysh: Why, with its huge success in piloting industry work placements and its leadership of best practice in the area, has Yeovil College been left out of the T-level pilots, and how can the Secretary of State help to make up for its and my disappointment?

Damian Hinds: We have thus far selected a relatively small number of colleges to teach the first three T-levels from 2020. This is an ongoing programme and more T-levels and colleges will come on stream in the years to come. We expect to launch the process to select providers for 2021 early in 2019.

Sir Robert Syms: I welcome the introduction of T-levels, which could be a game changer for the British economy. What other sectors are the Government talking to about introducing T-levels in future years?

Damian Hinds: Eventually, as per the Sainsbury report, we will be looking right across industry and the requirements for technical and vocational education and training. We are looking at the combination of T-levels and apprenticeships to deliver learning across those routes. These are just the first three for 2020 and there will be a further 12 to come very soon.

Mary Robinson: Small businesses account for 60% of all private sector employment in the UK. What support will the Government put in place to encourage and enable small businesses to offer T-level work placements?

Damian Hinds: Industrial placements are at the heart of the T-levels programme. We are investing £5 million in the National Apprenticeship Service to make sure that it can be a one-stop shop. We have published “How to” guidance for employers, and we continue to work closely with bodies such as the Federation of Small Businesses and small employers themselves to establish the support that they need to offer these placements.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. What is the Government’s plan for mandatory work placements as part of their new T-level when the number of learners exceeds the placements available from local employers? Answers that include “remote learning” or “online” will not be accepted.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for laying out his acceptance criteria for my response. The simple point is that we are working hard from now, not starting in 2020, to build up the availability of industrial placements, because they are such an important part of the programme.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State will do a bit better than he is doing on apprenticeships, which have collapsed in my constituency in the last two years, going from 350 starts to 50. Will he consider being more flexible about the time release rules for employers?

Damian Hinds: We think the quality requirements for apprenticeships are absolutely central, and that includes the 20% off-the-job training requirement, as well as the minimum 12-month length. We should also bear it in mind that over the last few years there has been further strengthening of the overall employment market, so today the proportion of young people who are unemployed and not in full-time education is down to 5%, as opposed to 8-point-something per cent. at the change of Government. The apprenticeship programme remains absolutely vital to building up the skills level of the nation.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Secretary of State might be content with T-level progress, but I am afraid that many in the sector are not. There is no clarity on work placements, on bridging options post-16, on the transition years that some need or on where T-levels sit in the post-18 review. The Department’s own research warns that having a single awarding body for T-levels risks system failure, and Ofqual says the same, while his own top civil servant advised a year’s delay, which he rejected. Is he content just agreeing with himself, or would he be happy with a process for T-levels with the wheels coming off—a magical mystery tour for young people that risks becoming a ghost train?

Damian Hinds: Dear oh dear! Gordon! I do not quite know where to go with that question, because I do not recognise its premise. I spend a great deal of time talking to employers, providers and others throughout the sector about this programme, and if the hon. Gentleman consults the Sainsbury report, he will see the overall blueprint. It is absolutely clear where T-levels fit in with the overall skills landscape, including levels 4 and 5, which also need improving. T-levels are fundamental to building up the country’s skills base, and I would expect to see him supporting them.

Education Settings

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that children educated in all settings are safe and receive a good education.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We continue to support schools in meeting their wide range of safeguarding duties, and as part of the integrated communities strategy, I have announced measures intended to safeguard children across the spectrum of educational settings, including out-of-school settings and home education.

James Cartlidge: The Bridge School, a specialist school in Ipswich, in my constituency, offers education to pupils of all ages with profound and severe learning difficulties. Following growing concerns about specific safeguarding issues, an Ofsted report was undertaken and found the school to be inadequate on every count,
which is almost unprecedented. There is now a real sense of instability at the school. Given the vulnerable nature of the children, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss what can be done?

Damian Hinds: Of course I understand that, and of course I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. Where a maintained school is judged inadequate, my Department has a legal duty to issue an academy order, and the regional schools commissioner is considering all further options available to support the school through this transition.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Schools in High Peak tell me that the vast majority of their applications for education, health and care plans are refused, meaning that children with very serious special needs, including autism, are left struggling and teachers are left trying to cope with them in large classes. What is the Secretary of State doing to assess the number of children with special needs who receive no support and to ensure that local authorities receive sufficient provision to support them all?

Damian Hinds: The education, health and care plans are an important step forward from the previous system, bringing together, as they do, the education, health and care considerations. If the hon. Lady has specific cases, we will of course look at them.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Department’s highly unusual application to the court for a closure order for the Darul Uloom School in Chislehurst has not only received wide publicity but raised concern among residents and, no doubt, parents. Will the Secretary of State update us on the position and meet me to discuss the way forward for this school, which has a long-standing poor record in academic matters?

Damian Hinds: Again, I understand those concerns, and of course I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend. We did apply to the magistrates court for an emergency order to close the school in his constituency. At a hearing last Friday, the school agreed some significant assurances, including—crucially—that the two individuals associated with the case would have no further involvement. The school will remain closed until a new trustee is appointed, who will be approved by the Department for Education.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): One group that is under-represented in tertiary education are care-experienced young people. Care leavers in Scotland will now be supported with a grant of £8,100 through college or university. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the steps the Scottish Government are taking? It was good to hear about the support packages he mentioned earlier for young people leaving care, but will he now consider a more realistic level of funding to allow these young people to access tertiary education?

Damian Hinds: I will always keep an open mind about what more we can do to help care leavers—that is at the heart of the care leavers covenant—and of course I will continue to look at what the Scottish Government do, as well as others.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): At the weekend I was contacted by a constituent who chairs one of the maintained nursery schools in north-east Lincolnshire. She expressed views similar to those expressed by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) about funding. Will my right hon. Friend confirm his continuing support for maintained nurseries, and will he ensure that funds are in place to provide the certainty that they require?

Damian Hinds: The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), talked about the maintained nursery sector earlier. I can confirm that we greatly value the role played by maintained nurseries, and will continue to work with them to ensure that they play that role as effectively as possible in our diverse early-years sector.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Children are not safe when they are being taught in schools where water pours through the ceiling when it rains, as happens in one school in my constituency. What is the Secretary of State doing to end the drought in capital funding for schools, particularly those like the one I have just mentioned?

Damian Hinds: I should of course be happy to look into the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We have allocated a total of £23 billion of capital for school buildings, but it is difficult for me to comment on that specific case from the Dispatch Box without knowing the details.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Information released accidentally from Ofsted shows that only 4% of schools in the most deprived areas achieve “outstanding” ratings, compared to 58% in the least deprived. Inspections are measuring deprivation rather than the quality of teaching and learning. Does the Secretary of State not agree that that is morally repugnant?

Damian Hinds: At the heart of our priorities since May 2010 has been raising standards for all children while also narrowing the gap, and I welcome the narrowing gap that we have seen in both primary and secondary schools. Is there more to do? Yes, there is, and that is at the heart of our opportunity areas programme, which—as the hon. Gentleman will know—identifies the pockets of under-achievement that may exist even in otherwise more affluent regions, and seeks to establish what area-specific conditions are required.

Northern Powerhouse Schools Strategy


The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): As recommended by Sir Nick Weller, we have implemented a range of measures in the north to improve teaching and leadership capacity, recruit and retain teachers, and
close the disadvantage gap. In 2017, nearly 400,000 more children were in good or outstanding schools in the north than in 2010.

Imran Hussain: When the strategy was announced, £80 million of funding was attached to it, but just months later that was rowed back to £70 million. Now, according to the vice-chair of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, nothing at all has been spent. Can the Minister tell me how much has been spent so far, and how much of that has been spent on recruiting teachers in Bradford in particular?

Damian Hinds: We continue to spend on a range of programmes in the north, and some of the results are reflected in the figures I have just given. Bradford is of course one of the opportunity areas to which I referred, and £1.5 million has been provided to fund school improvements there. We are seeking to support the work of Bradford for Teaching, and Academy Ambassadors is working to further strengthen multi-academy trusts across the north. Altogether, more than £767 million of additional pupil premium funding was allocated to schools in the north, which over-indexed on pupil premium funding in comparison with the rest of the country.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Government did indeed commit themselves to spending £70 million on improving educational attainment in the north. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that they have in fact spent considerably more than that?

Damian Hinds: I am happy to confirm that we remain committed to all areas of the country. In English education there is nothing as simple as a north-south divide. There are areas of educational under-achievement in the north, the south and the middle. We need to seek them out wherever they are, and provide the support and accountability that are needed to ensure that those children too can thrive.

School Budgets

10. Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What estimate has he made of the number of schools that will have a cash terms reduction in their budget in 2018-19 compared with 2017-18. [906009]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Through the national funding formula, we are giving every local authority more money for every pupil in every school in 2018-19 and 2019-20. However, we have always made it clear that local authorities remain responsible for determining schools’ final budget allocations in these transition years, in consultation with their schools.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I am horrified by what it contains, because the reality is that in my constituency, in the Borough of Tower Hamlets, there will be £28 million of cuts by 2020 in an area with the highest child poverty in the country. Where is the fairness in that, and will the Minister and the Secretary of State show some guts and stand up to the Prime Minister, perhaps like the Defence Secretary, and call an end to the billions of pounds of cuts in national funding of education?

Nick Gibb: Under the national funding formula we prioritise children from disadvantaged backgrounds; that is a key element of the way we allocate funding in a fairer way. In the hon. Lady’s constituency, the average per pupil funding for primary schools under the national funding formula when it is fully implemented will be £6,140, compared with the national average of £4,193 per primary school pupil. For secondary, the hon. Lady’s schools will be funded at £7,965 per pupil compared with the national average of £5,380.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Minister knows that I have written to him and met him to discuss some of the budgets of schools in my constituency, which seem to be going down, at variance to the impression the Government would give; and those schools where the budget is going up seem to have their costs increasing at a faster rate than the increase in funding they are getting. Will the Minister look again at the schools budget in the Shipley constituency? Will he perhaps write to me with his understanding of what each school is getting this year and in the next financial year compared with the last financial year, and will he commit to making sure they get adequate funding? And if he is looking for a pot of money, perhaps the overseas aid budget would be a good place to start.

Nick Gibb: Of course I will write to my hon. Friend as he asks, but I have to say that we are spending record amounts of money on schools, some £42.4 billion this year. There has never been a sum as high spent on schools in our history, and it will rise again next year to £43.5 billion, and we announced an increase in school funding last July to the tune of £1.3 billion. That was the result of successful negotiations with the Treasury.

21. [906023] Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): All Birkenhead schools, like schools throughout the country, suffer real cuts in their budgets. Will the Minister meet me to seek ways by which we automatically enrol all poor children for free school dinners, and, as importantly, the Government’s initiative, the school premium?

Nick Gibb: The right hon. Gentleman makes some interesting points and I will take advice on his suggestions, but I must say that we have guaranteed the pupil premium to the end of this Parliament: it is over £1,300 for every pupil eligible for free school meals attending a primary school, and nearly £1,000 for every disadvantaged child attending a secondary school.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there is nothing morally superior about maintaining a blatantly unfair existing system, and is it not fair and reasonable therefore to target increases in school funding on schools, such as those in Worcestershire, that have been relatively underfunded for decades?

Nick Gibb: This Government have grasped the nettle and are introducing a fairer, more transparent funding system, which the previous Labour Government shied away from.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Chancellor gave a guarantee that not a single school would lose a single penny—no ifs, no buts, no small
print, but an ironclad, copper-bottomed guarantee. Now he is trying to wriggle out of it like a second-hand car salesman. If Private Pike is prepared to go to war to get funding for defence, why is the Education Secretary waving the white flag rather than meeting his guarantee on schools?

Nick Gibb: The national fairer funding system is giving every local authority in the country more money for every pupil in every school in 2018-19 and 2019-20, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that school funding will be maintained in real terms per pupil in those two years. But we have always been clear that for these two years we will allow some discretion to local authorities as to how they allocate that funding to each of their local schools, and that is why the points the hon. Lady made arise: because we have given discretion to local authorities.

Academy Trusts

11. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to respond to poorly performing academy trusts.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): As the Secretary of State outlined in his speech to the National Association of Head Teachers, we will support and hold to account trusts with poor educational, financial or governance performance. We will continue to act swiftly and robustly to turn around academies that Ofsted has judged inadequate, bringing about leadership change if that is necessary.

Justin Madders: I thank the Department and the Secretary of State for agreeing to meet me and colleagues last week to discuss our concerns about the performance of the University of Chester Academies Trust. Now that they have heard our concerns, can the Minister assure us that they will deal with these matters as swiftly as possible?

Nick Gibb: Yes, we will. The University Church of England Academy was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in April last year. There was then a question of whether the multi-academy trust could provide the support that that school needed. Following a recent Ofsted monitoring visit to the academy, the Department took the view that insufficient progress was being made and that the leadership of the trust was not taking sufficient action. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to the hon. Gentleman confirming that the leadership of the trust was not taking sufficient monitoring visit to the academy, the Department took that that school needed. Following a recent Ofsted in April last year. There was then a question of whether the multi-academy trust could provide the support

Neurodiverse People

12. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve the learning experience for neurodiverse people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I witnessed at first hand the work of the Autism Education Trust at the Rise School in Feltham, in helping to train schoolteachers, receptionists, caretakers and others across the teams in schools. About 175,000 people have been trained to recognise and help children with autism.

Mr Sweeney: Rossie Stone set up Dekko Comics in my constituency two years ago after suffering from dyslexia throughout school. He found that by creating a gamified version of school lessons, he was able to improve his academic performance rapidly. Will the Minister consider how using gamified methods of teaching can rapidly improve learning outcomes for people who are neurodiverse?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are looking at innovation across the board in the Department, and one of the areas that we are looking at is gamified work. I have seen some excellent work being done with children in Luton.

STEM Subjects

13. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to increase the take-up of STEM subjects.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Government are committed to tackling our need for science, technology, engineering and maths skills in order to create a dynamic, innovation-driven economy. That is why we are investing an additional £406 million in skills, including maths and digital. This includes the advanced maths premium, and an £84 million programme to improve the teaching of computing, which should help to increase the take-up of these subjects.

Colin Clark: The Oil & Gas Technology Centre in Aberdeen is a major promoter of STEM subjects. Does the Minister agree that it is essential to prioritise the take-up of STEM subjects if we are to have the engineers and technicians that we need for the future?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is why we are encouraging more students into STEM education across the entire school system. We have seen a 17% overall increase in entries to STEM A-levels since 1996. However, there is clearly a lot more to do, which is why we are focused on doing a lot through careers and others across the teams in schools. About 175,000 people have been trained to recognise and help children with autism.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): One of the major factors affecting the uptake of STEM subjects is the expertise of the teachers. However, Department for Education data show that one third of physics teachers in England do not have a relevant degree in the subject. Rather than simply accepting that as an unfortunate reality, what steps is the Minister taking to upskill STEM teachers? Will he commit to following Scotland’s example in making a relevant degree a requirement for entering the profession?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good question. We have subject-level enhancement courses for teachers. Also, there is a £26,000 tax-free allowance to attract teachers
Is this just another day, another Brexit blunder? Certainty is given soon about the status of EU students such as Cambridge, but they face a real drop-off unless they apply to medical and dentistry schools and universities. The admissions process is open and people are waiting to need very soon. That students and institutions have the information they year will not open until September 2019. We will ensure that the results of the policy are on the eligibility of EU students starting in 2019-20 for home fee status and student loans and grants.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Based on last year’s GCSE results, converter academies and free schools had higher Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores than the average for state-funded schools overall. In fact, eight of the top 10 schools for progress made by pupils were either academies or free schools. That is evidence that free schools and academies are delivering high standards for their pupils, and that particularly includes disadvantaged pupils.

Mr Jayawardena: The Department for Education has identified target local authority areas for raising standards. Further to my right hon. Friend’s answer, does he agree that free schools that are accessible to anyone, wherever they might live in that area or beyond, will increase parental choice and improve standards?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. Since 2010, the creation of the free schools programme has been a huge success. Those schools, which often serve disproportionately disadvantaged communities, have unleashed innovation and driven up academic standards. To give just one example, 92% of disadvantaged pupils at Reach Academy Feltham achieved grade 4 or above in English and maths last year.

Higher Education: EU Students

16. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What his policy is on the eligibility of EU students starting courses in English higher education institutions in 2019-20 and 2020-21 for home fee status and student loans and grants.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): EU students, staff and researchers make an important contribution to our universities. We want that contribution to continue and we are confident, given the quality of our higher education sector, that it will do so. Information on eligibility for the academic year 2019-20 will be made available for students and institutions as soon as possible.

Daniel Zeichner: We need much more urgency. The admissions process is open and people are waiting to apply to medical and dentistry schools and universities such as Cambridge, but they face a real drop-off unless certainty is given soon about the status of EU students next year. Why do the Government not support British universities, which are among our great export earners? Is this just another day, another Brexit blunder?

Mr Gyimah: We hugely support our universities. Applications for courses starting in the 2020-21 academic year will not open until September 2019. We will ensure that students and institutions have the information they need very soon.

Post-16 Education: Social Mobility

18. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve social mobility in post-16 education.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We published a plan last year for improving social mobility through education, which set out the actions we are taking to increase social mobility. A crucial part of that is a career strategy, which I launched last year. Legislation came into force this year, including a requirement to allow further education technical and apprenticeship providers to have the opportunity to talk to young people. At the heart of the career strategy are those Gatsby benchmarks, which will make sure that young people get good careers advice.

Mr Sharma: In a country with world-leading education, why is there such a significant attainment gap for those with English as a second language?

Anne Milton: This is absolutely crucial. Obviously, someone who cannot speak English will be at a disadvantage. We have done a great deal more to improve the roll-out of ESOL. On the work we are doing in primary schools, the proportion of six-year-olds meeting expected standards in the phonics screening check has risen dramatically.

Children’s Centres

20. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the (a) effectiveness of children’s centres and (b) ability of families to access those centres.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is right that local councils decide how they spend on children’s centres. Our priority is to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children overall. It is not just about bricks and mortar, but about using and improving evidence about what works.

Sandy Martin: Given that there are now at least 1,240 fewer designated Sure Start children’s centres than there were in 2010, will the Department commit to retaining the remaining two thirds of the original centres and invest in improving the range of services they offer?

Nadhim Zahawi: This Government are spending £6 billion on childcare. It is not just about bricks and mortar. There are 2,300 children’s centres and they are very much part of the overall picture, but we will do what works. We have committed £8.5 million for councils to peer review each other, to see what is actually working. I hope that, like the Government, the hon. Gentleman is interested in outcomes rather than just bricks and mortar.

Topical Questions

T1. [906025] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.
The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):
In the past month, we have announced £730 million of capital funding to create new school places. That will bring to 1 million the additional school places to be created over the decade, making it the biggest for investment in school capacity for at least two generations. Friday was Thank a Teacher Day, and we have more of them to thank than ever before, as well as more to thank them for.

Gavin Newlands: This year’s *Times Higher Education* rankings show UK universities falling down the league tables. Does the Secretary of State agree that that makes it even more vital that the UK relaxes any restrictions on EU academic and research staff post Brexit, to ensure that our universities do not become isolated and cut off from development?

Damian Hinds: Our higher education sector performs extremely well in the international comparisons. It is a popular destination for international students, including EU students, and, indeed, it remains a popular destination for EU academics.

T2. [906029] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): A report by academics at the London School of Economics found that schools that introduced a ban on mobile phones saw a 2% increase in the number of pupils achieving five good GCSEs. The Minister and I both agree with school freedom, but will he consider introducing stronger guidance and more help for schools that choose to implement stronger controls on mobile phones?

Damian Hinds: I agree with my hon. Friend that we want children off their phones and focused on their lessons. As he says, we know from research that that improves results. I am also very clear that it is for the people in charge of schools—the headteachers—to make the detail of their disciplinary rules.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Just weeks ago, Ministers stood at the Dispatch Box, rejected our call to save the NHS bursary and promised that 5,000 apprentice nursing associates would be recruited this year to tackle the nursing shortage. Half were due to be recruited by April. Can the Minister confirm that Ministers have now missed that target by 60% and tell us how many people will start apprenticeships this year?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We need to make sure that nursing apprenticeships and apprenticeships for nursing assistants work well. There are complex problems in the NHS, not least in providing 40% off-the-job training and the fact that those apprentices are supernumerary. I am working very closely with Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that we make this work.

I was, in effect, a nursing apprentice. I know how well such apprenticeships can work, and I am determined to make sure they do.

T3. [906027] Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): When will the Minister have the opportunity to review the zoning of the area cost adjustment element of the national funding formula?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We calculate the area cost adjustment using data on teacher pay and data from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on general labour market costs. For teacher pay we use the regional teacher pay bands as zones, but we will keep it under review to ensure that funding always matches need as closely as possible.

T6. [906031] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The news from the Children’s Commissioner that there are over 30,000 children aged between 10 and 15 involved in gangs will surely be deeply concerning to everyone. What is the Department doing to tackle this problem, not least because the Children’s Commissioner identifies that many of these vulnerable young people are groomed from pupil referral units?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I sit on the Home Secretary’s serious violence taskforce, and we are publishing revised statutory guidance, “Working together to safeguard children,” which makes clear the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in protecting children from gangs. The guidance also offers links to further advice on these forms of abuse. Obviously, we also have our strategy for alternative provision—the hon. Gentleman referred to pupil referral units.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Approximately 48,000 children are being home educated in England. In the light of the Government’s consultation on home education, which ends next Monday, can the Minister clarify what steps his Department is taking to reassure home educators that their views will be fed into the Government’s consultation response?

Damian Hinds: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We are having this consultation, and there has been a rise in children being home educated, which of course includes some children with particular special educational needs who have had a particularly bad time in the school system and whose parents devote their lives to their education—I pay tribute to those parents. The rise includes other categories, but it is important that we listen carefully, and we will, to those parents in the consultation.

T7. [906032] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the Minister realise that more than 300 pupils were denied their first-choice school as a result of the Government cuts to local government education budgets in Coventry? What is he going to do about it?

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the national figures, he will find that, at primary, something like 97% of families received an offer of a place in one of their top-three schools, with 91% offered their first choice. At secondary, 94% of families received an offer of a place at their first-choice school. We have created 825,000 school places since 2010, following on from a Labour Government who actually cut 100,000 school places from the system.

T5. [906030] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Hard-working teachers in small rural schools in places like West Oxfordshire are ingenious in wringing every last penny of value out of their budgets, but what are Ministers doing to ensure those schools have the funding they need to thrive?
Nick Gibb: Our national funding formula is a much fairer way of allocating funding, and it also supports small rural schools, particularly in areas such as West Oxfordshire, by providing a lump sum of £110,000 for every school and by targeting funding to small and remote schools through the sparsity factor. That provides up to an additional £65,000 for small rural secondary schools and £25,000 for primaries.

T8. [906033] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Centre for Global Higher Education has identified that EU academics fill gaps in subjects such as science, technology, engineering and maths where there are insufficient numbers of UK-qualified academics. With Brexit fast approaching, how are the Government going to maintain staffing levels, let alone magically increase the number of UK-qualified academics?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): As part of the EU negotiations, we are mindful of the fact that we want academics here to work with academics from abroad. The Prime Minister said in her most recent science speech that roughly 50% of researchers in the UK are from the EU—we intend that to remain the same post Brexit.

T9. [906034] Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): There is still a strong demand across businesses in my constituency for technical skills. What progress has been made on the introduction of the new institutes of technology?

Anne Milton: Sixteen proposals for institutes of technology will go through to stage 2, which we will launch in July. IOTs are a collaboration between higher education and further education, with a focus on levels 4 and 5; traditionally, this has been rather neglected in this country but it is so crucial for building the skills base. They will also extend to levels 6 and 7. There will be a £170 million capital fund to help IOTs get off the ground.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I have recently learned that “consequence booths”, where children spend up to seven hours in a small booth without contact with peers, are being used by academies in my constituency. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can protect children in Stockton South from this threat to their mental health?

Nick Gibb: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that issue.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Minister join me in encouraging young people in Walsall to attend the open evening at Walsall College, rated as outstanding by Ofsted, on Wednesday afternoon from 4 till 7, in advance of it delivering T-levels from September?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend has given a great advert for T-levels. Contrary to what the shadow Minister said, T-levels have been viewed as a huge success, as shown by the broad support at the conference of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers this morning. They are a fantastic opportunity for our young people.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, a survey of teachers by the charity stem4 revealed that students are facing a mental health epidemic and are not receiving the support they need. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the number of counsellors, educational psychologists, peer mentors and pastoral care staff that have been lost from our schools in recent years? What assurances will he give that the proposals in the “Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision” Green Paper will bring about a genuine addition to the mental health workforce in our schools and not just replace what has already been lost?

Nick Gibb: This Government take mental health very seriously. Some 84% of secondary schools have a counsellor to help children deal with mental health issues and stress, and we have unveiled our Green Paper, whereby we intend to improve mental health support for young people in our schools, including by having a designated senior mental health lead in every school in the country.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The teachers I meet in my constituency want to use more of their judgment and to reduce their assessment workload. Will the new goals for four to five-year-olds achieve on both fronts?

Nick Gibb: We are introducing a baseline assessment so that we can measure the progress that all pupils make in their time at primary school, and that will be based very much on assessment and observation.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Northern College has recently started teaching a pioneering 10-week course to help survivors of modern slavery. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the work the College has recently started teaching a pioneering 10-week course to help survivors of modern slavery. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the work of Northern College? Will he also meet me to discuss its difficulty in using public funds to fund these vital courses because of current immigration regulations?

Damian Hinds: Of course I will meet the hon. Lady, and I pay tribute to what she is doing to make sure that the survivors and victims of modern slavery are given all the opportunities possible.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Following the announcement on the obesity strategy, what consideration is being given to opening up school sports facilities for free after school and during the holidays to parents and sports clubs that provide constructive opportunities for young people?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Schools increasingly use their facilities for the community and to raise further income. We take school sport extremely seriously and the obesity strategy encourages more young people to be active every day of the week.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In last month’s Westminster Hall debate on school funding, the Minister said that per-pupil funding at Twerton Infant School in Bath would rise, but the headteacher maintains that it will not. If the Minister is so confident about his figures, will he please publish them next month?
Nick Gibb: The figures have already been published. We are providing increases in school funding for every school and every pupil—we are providing funding to local authorities on that basis. It is up to local authorities, in discussion with their schools, to decide how to allocate that funding to individual schools. I suggest that the hon. Lady takes up the matter with her local authority.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This morning, I attended the schools' engineering and technology competition in Chelmsford, where Essex students had designed a wheelchair that climbs stairs. Does the Minister agree that such projects are key to inspiring the engineers of the future? Will he congratulate the Chelmsford Science and Engineering Society and all who were involved?

Damian Hinds: Yes to all the above.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This month, Newcastle's £9 million Discovery free school closed following a devastating Ofsted report. The Department for Education has said that it—or rather, the taxpayer—will bear the financial cost. Does the Minister recognise that the cost to the students, the people and the economy will be borne by the city of Newcastle, which should have been responsible for the school in the first place?

Nick Gibb: Yes; we take these issues very seriously. We take swift action when free schools such as that one fail. It was sponsored by the Newcastle colleges, with Newcastle University's involvement, but it was not delivering the required results so we took swift action and closed it. All the pupils will be placed in other, better schools.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that daily mile initiatives are included as part of the childhood obesity strategy?

Nadhim Zahawi: On top of what we are doing, including the £26 million for breakfast clubs and the doubling of the physical education and sports premium, we would like schools to embrace the active mile as a simple, fun and inclusive way to build physical activity.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Earlier, the Minister claimed repeatedly that funding for the nursery sector is entirely adequate. On that basis, will more nurseries be open at the end of this Parliament than at the beginning?

Nadhim Zahawi: The important thing is to make sure that we have sufficiency in the system—that is, enough places—and I am confident that we will. This summer, 340,000 three and four-year-olds will benefit from 30 hours' free childcare a week; that is to be celebrated.
Leaving the EU: Airbus Risk Assessment

3.37 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement following the publication on Friday of the Airbus Brexit risk assessment report and its implications for future investment and job security in the UK.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The aerospace sector is one of the UK’s greatest manufacturing strengths. Directly and through its supply chains, it employs in the UK around 300,000 people in high-skilled jobs, with an average salary of £41,000—that is 43% above the national average. Of the sector’s £33 billion turnover, some 90% is accounted for in exports. From Bombardier in Belfast to Airbus in Filton, the supply chain that the sector operates is complex, precise and just-in-time. The industry is in demand around the world and that demand is growing rapidly, with the sector doubling in size every 15 years. Airbus is a very important part of that success, employing 14,000 people across 25 sites, with 110,000 people working in the supply chain of 4,000 small, medium and large companies.

On Friday, Airbus published a risk assessment, in which it stated to suppliers and to the UK and EU member states that if an agreement between the EU and the UK were not reached by 29 March 2019, its production would be likely to be severely disrupted, with a significant impact on the company. It also said that any agreement that involved significant change to customs arrangements would take time to implement through Airbus’ supply chain, and that any agreement that involved new procedures, complexity or frictions would undermine the efficiency of the company’s operations. That is completely consistent with what every part of the industry collectively has been saying directly, as well as through the ADS industry trade body and the international body the General Aviation Manufacturers Association, including in a letter to Michel Barnier at the European Commission earlier this month. Any company and any industry that supports the livelihoods of so many working people in this country is entitled to be listened to with respect.

The Government have been clear that we are determined to secure a deal with the EU that meets the needs of our aerospace firms and the thousands of people whose livelihoods depend on them and that, in particular, products made in the UK can be approved for use across Europe, that there should be no tariffs or any unnecessary friction in the trade between the UK and the EU, and that skilled employees will be able to work across the multiple sites of an integrated operation. Those objectives have been clearly set out by the Prime Minister in public and in our negotiations.

In the months ahead, my colleagues and I will work closely with businesses to ensure that, under the terms of our new relationship, we can continue to enjoy the prosperity that working in aerospace brings to so many people in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Mark Tami: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this important urgent question and I thank the Secretary of State for his response.

Does the Secretary of State agree that the continued operation of Airbus in the UK is vital to the UK economy and that we need to take seriously its worries and concerns? Alternatively, does he support the comments of the International Trade Secretary, who said that we should ignore the views of business? Or does he agree with the views of the Health Secretary, who said that it was inappropriate of Airbus to raise concerns? Finally, does he support the more direct approach of the Foreign Secretary, who said, “F*** business”? I know that the Foreign Secretary has to be elsewhere today; I believe that he has gone as far as Afghanistan to avoid the Heathrow vote. Are not those comments indicative of the chaos in Government over Brexit and of the Government’s approach to anyone who dares to raise genuine concerns?

Airbus has been raising those concerns privately for 12 months and getting absolutely nowhere. Can the Secretary of State explain why it is now, when it has done it publicly, that it is shouted down by Cabinet Ministers? Will he meet me and representatives from Airbus to address the serious concerns raised in the report? Does he accept that the lead-in times for investment in aerospace are long and that the sums of money are huge? For Airbus, it is all about securing the next generation of wing work, and those decisions are being taken now.

Is it not the case that, without clarity on Brexit, investment could be placed outside the UK—either in the EU itself, or in low-cost producer countries such as China where the company has a plant? Airbus’s concerns are real and shared by many other manufacturers such as BMW and Siemens. The Government need to wake up and listen rather than just address Tory infighting.

Greg Clark: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has more than 6,500 people employed in his constituency in good jobs, and many more in the supply chain. Members from all parts of the House have constituents whose prosperous careers and excellent opportunities come from working in this important sector. Let us be clear: this sector is one of our proudest strengths and it is expanding. The opportunities around the world grow every year and the excellence that we have needs to be nurtured and cherished. I take seriously the representations of all businesses because we are talking about not speculation or visions of the future, but the reality of the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people across the country, which is important.

It is the case that we should listen to businesses. Of course, what Airbus has said was consistent with what it has said before and consistent with what it has said to Select Committees of this House. Very importantly, it was addressed equally to the European Commission and to member states of the European Union. It is very clear that, in order to have the agreement that we seek, it is necessary that both sides of the discussions should participate. Airbus has been clear that it is in the interests of the whole country and the whole company that that should be the case. I hope that that message will be heard in Brussels as well as in this country.

The hon. Gentleman asked questions about listening to business. All Government Members recognise that the livelihoods of millions of people, and the prosperity of our country, depend on business being successful. We will not always agree with everything that businesses say, but they have the right to be heard. The hon. Gentleman was rather one-sided in his representations;
I think that he should direct some of his recommendations to his own Front Benchers, who have not been a picture of clarity on what they would like from these negotiations.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain to some of his Cabinet colleagues and others that it is simply not going to be possible to opt into most of the benefits of the single market and the customs union, while rejecting every trade rule and regulatory arrangement that the member states of the EU accept as part of that deal? Does he also agree that if, at the end of our negotiations, we start erecting new tariff barriers, new customs procedures and new regulatory divergences, it is perfectly obvious that we are going to deter inward investment from companies such as Airbus, BMW, Siemens and many others, with long-lasting damage to our economy?

Greg Clark: It is imperative that we do not do that. It is actually more optimistic than my right hon. and learned Friend about the prospects of a deal that will avoid that. Part of what this company and others have said is that it is strongly in the mutual interest of this international business that there should be an orderly agreement that allows a very successful company to continue to trade without friction. I think that that is in prospect.

We are leaving the European Union; that decision has been clearly taken. The task before us is to make an agreement that implements that decision and which, at the same time, ensures that these avoidable threats of frictions and tariffs do not take place. That is absolutely within our grasp and it is what the whole House should back during the months ahead.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) on securing it and on so eloquently setting out the importance of Airbus to our economy and the 110,000 workers whose livelihoods depend on it.

Airbus is not alone. Last week we heard from: BMW, which has 8,000 workers; Unipart, with 6,000 workers; Siemens, with 15,000 workers; and INEOS, which has 18,500 workers. These are the ones that have put their heads above the parapet, to be shot down by their own Government. The Secretary of State may say that he is listening, but the Health Secretary calls Airbus “completely inappropriate”; the Trade Secretary blames the EU and it would be unparliamentary to fully quote the Foreign Secretary, wherever he is.

Businesses are told to shut up when they call for clarity, Labour MPs are accused of scaremongering and Conservative MPs are called traitors. This Government are so insecure—so at odds with themselves and the country—that they cannot stand scrutiny. Their chaotic handling of Brexit is dividing the country, not bringing it together, and it is risking our industrial base. They should abandon their red lines, rule out no deal, accept that a new customs union and single market is in all our interests, and give business and workers the certainty that they need—or step aside for a Labour Government who will.

Greg Clark: We listen to the voice of business—large and small, across the country. Let us reflect on the months past. The hon. Lady knows that, around a year ago, business—again, large and small, across the country—said how important it was to have an implementation period. That proposal was put forward, adopted by the Prime Minister and has now been agreed with the European Union.

In her Mansion House speech, again, the Prime Minister responded to what business communicated very clearly in saying that we should be able to continue to be part of bodies like EASA—the European Aviation Safety Agency—which is responsible for aviation safety. That was also something that was recognised. Business recognises that this Government do listen and do act on the advice that business gives during these negotiations. It is an approach that is serious and sober. It recognises the challenges and complexity of the negotiations and addresses them in a responsible way.

I am glad that the hon. Lady calls for a degree of cool-headedness and consensus around this, because 80% of colleagues—80%-plus, I think,—were elected on a platform that recognised the importance of leaving the European Union. What is before us is to make sure that the deal that we get is something that can be supported. But at every turn, her party changes its position—not for any reason of substance, but to maximise political advantage: shape-shifting to try to catch the Government out. In the past two years, we have had from Labour, at my last count, 15 tests, five red lines, four bottom lines, 170 questions and four key messages, but no coherent policy. Meanwhile, we in the Government are getting on with the task in hand, and that is precisely what she should do.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for coming so quickly to the House? When he was answering the original question, did he notice the irony that Siemens, among many other companies, has already been showing its faith in the UK even before this, with a £200 million investment in Goole to make sure that it is able to be here because it is where the talent lies? Would he not also consider it slightly ironic if the complaints from Airbus were such that it actually moved its production to China, given that China has never even been in the European Union?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is right. I hope that he would acknowledge that my Department and this Government are energetic in promoting the advantages of locating in Britain, and not just at the new facility in Goole—I had the great privilege of opening the Siemens blade factory in Hull, employing 1,000 people. People locate in this country because it is a good place in which to invest. We have an environment of innovation and excellence—it is a tribute to the workforce—and we want to keep it that way. It is therefore incumbent on us, when we have industrial investors who are committing for years ahead, to listen to what they say about the requirements from the negotiation. He and I completely agree that in that relationship, we want to make sure that we do not have tariffs and we do not have frictions. That is what the company wants, that is what we want, and now we need to agree it with our European counterparts.
The UK Government’s disastrous plan to leave the EU customs union and single market risks 80,000 jobs by 2030 in Scotland. Will the Secretary of State provide details about how the Government will protect 8,000 jobs and £541 million of activity in Scotland indirectly supported by Airbus? What technical discussions has he had with Airbus and sectoral organisations on the impact Brexit will have on the industry? In the light of this, what policy changes, if any, will he take forward?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman talks about the impact of Brexit. It may have escaped his attention that we are negotiating the terms of our future economic partnership with the rest of the EU. The representations that have been made by Airbus—as I say, directed at the UK but also at other member states and the Commission—are about what that future economic partnership should look like. I hope there will be a broad consensus in the House that it should be a regime that allows fantastic sectors and companies within them to not only continue to export in a just-in-time system in which any delay at the border undermines the business model, but also to expand production in a rapidly expanding market, not just in Europe but around the world. That is what we are negotiating, and that is the context in which Airbus has given advice to us and the other side of the negotiations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Given that there is a further urgent question to come, thereafter to be followed by a ministerial statement and subsequently a debate on the Heathrow motion, which I can tell colleagues is extremely heavily subscribed, the Chair’s accommodation of the extensive interest in this matter will require brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike—to be demonstrated in the first instance by a co-author of the short questions textbook, Mr John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does not Boeing’s decision to make a major manufacturing investment in this country show that a complex supply chain can be run with a lot coming in from outside the EU perfectly well and give the lie to the idea that we will not be able to supply the wings to Airbus?

Greg Clark: I want Britain to be the best place in the world to produce advanced manufacturing products, and that means we should be tenacious in looking at every way to make the supply chain competitive. Given that our parts go backwards and forwards between the UK and the continent, if we can avoid frictions, as I am certain we can, that enhances our ability to compete, which is to the advantage of Boeing as well as any other company in the industry.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Is it not pretty damning that the Secretary of State has had to come to the Dispatch Box today to say that Airbus should be treated with respect when it tells the truth, rather than be criticised? Since the whole House knows that he understands what is at stake here, does he agree that the fact that the Cabinet is still arguing about what kind of customs arrangements it wants two years after the referendum is why a growing number of businesses despair at the Government’s inability to get a grip of this issue?

Greg Clark: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. On the first point, we are an open economy. Businesses that employ people here are perfectly free to speak out and have a right to do so. It is incumbent on the Government to listen to what they say and factor that into the negotiations we are having. We have been very clear about that.

When it comes to the negotiation of our future customs arrangements, the right hon. Gentleman knows, as Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, which has given this extensive scrutiny, that up to now we have been discussing the terms of our withdrawal. We are coming on to talk about the future economic partnership. We are negotiating and setting out what we want to achieve through that, and this was always the time when that would be done. For evidence from Airbus and other companies to come forward at this time is to be expected, given the focus of the discussions over the weeks ahead.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): A small business in my constituency that employs 180 people is part of the Airbus supply chain, so this matters very much to the good people of Broxtowe. I congratulate the Secretary of State on his statement and welcome it, but Airbus is not alone in having grave concerns about what the Government’s position will be on Brexit and seeking clarity. Will he assure people first that the Conservative party remains the party of business, and secondly that when British businesses speak out, they should be able to do so without fear or favour and be listened to with respect?

Greg Clark: The answer to my right hon. Friend is: yes, and yes.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): When the Health Secretary suggested that Airbus should get behind the Prime Minister’s position, which of the positions on customs was he referring to: a customs partnership, maximum facilitation or customs arrangements?

Greg Clark: If the right hon. Gentleman had read what Airbus said, on which my right hon. Friend was commenting, he would know that it gave a forensic analysis of its requirements when it comes to imports and exports. The import of that was that it needs to avoid frictions and tariffs, which is precisely what the Prime Minister has committed to.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There are no tariffs on the aerospace industry under world trade rules, are there?
Greg Clark: The aerospace sector includes various components that do attract tariffs, and it is very important that we should have zero tariffs on all such components.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I am pleased that the Secretary of State is being sensible and listening to the concerns of business, unlike some of the disgraceful comments of his colleagues. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what assessment his Department has made of the impact on jobs and investment in the aerospace sector, and the impact not only on Airbus, but on companies in the supply chain, such as UTC Aerospace Systems in my constituency, of leaving the single market and the customs union?

Greg Clark: The supply chain of Airbus and indeed of every company in the sector is pervasive right across the UK, and many employers—small and large—across many of our constituencies contribute to it. The hon. Lady asks about the impact of leaving the single market. The purpose of the negotiations in the months ahead is to make sure, as we leave the European Union and as we leave the single market—she knows that it is not possible to be a member of the single market and to be leaving the European Union—that we have an agreement that allows us to trade without frictions and without tariffs. That is our purpose, and it is what the Prime Minister has very clearly set out. It is within our grasp, and I am confident we will be able to achieve it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is not the truth that the kind of Brexit deal that will fully safeguard our industrial base will be one that requires significant compromises? Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are fast approaching the moment when we need to spell out, for the benefit of business and industry, what those compromises look like?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is right that any negotiation of course involves give and take. That is true on both sides, and it is important to remember that these observations have been addressed to the European Union as well as to the UK. My right hon. Friend talks about the time. As I said to the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), now is the time when we are moving on from discussing the terms of our withdrawal to what our future economic partnership looks like. This is precisely the time at which we will set out and agree, I hope, a long-term future in which Airbus and many other companies can prosper.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Airbus and its supply chain are significant employers in north Bristol, so will the Secretary of State set out what assessment his Department has made of the number of jobs that need to be put at risk, the number of families’ lives that need to be devastated and the amount of damage that needs to be done to British industry before the threshold is met for the definition of a duff deal on Brexit, and will he at that stage join me and others in calling for a people’s vote?

Greg Clark: I think the hon. Gentleman would be more productive if he engaged with the substance of the negotiation. We are leaving the European Union, and what is required is to reach an agreement that avoids frictions and tariffs. It is perfectly possible to agree such an accord with the European Union. That is our purpose, and we will faithfully implement it.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Thousands of jobs in the north-west depend on Airbus and its supply chain there. Does the Secretary of State agree that close regulatory alignment is also a requirement to help to ensure that trade is as frictionless as possible?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right in alluding to the fact that an aeroplane, which is what we are talking about, is a combination of products from different countries. They need to come together—this is inherently international—so to have standards for wings that are different from standards for engines and parts of the fuselage would clearly be incompatible with having a plane that flies. There is good sense in having an agreement that brings coherence to what is a single product manufactured in different parts of Europe.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House’s attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

My constituents, many of whom work at Airbus plants in Newport or across the Severn bridge in north Bristol in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), also face devastation from the prospects of a hard Brexit. Will the Secretary of State therefore join me in condemning the leader of the Welsh Conservatives for his comments describing Airbus’s remarks as “hyperbole”, “threats” and “exaggerating”, and agree with his ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who has described senior Cabinet Ministers’ comments as “both unworthy and inflammatory”?

Greg Clark: I have said very clearly, as I hope the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge, that it is entirely reasonable for any firm that employs people and pays taxes in this country to contribute its expertise and experience to the discussions that we are having.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Article 50 provides that the withdrawal negotiations should take into account the framework for the future relationship between the departing member state and the continuing EU. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the lack of clarity, about which Airbus is quite reasonably complaining, is a consequence, at least in part, of the flat refusal by the European Union to discuss that future relationship?

Greg Clark: One of the things that Airbus has set out is what it regards, correctly in my view, as the serious consequences for it of a Brexit without an agreement. It is in all our interests, on both sides of the channel, to have an agreement that avoids that. My right hon. Friend is right that Airbus and the various trade associations, some of them international, to which it belongs, have made the same points to other member states and to the European Commission. I hope that it will be heard in Brussels as well as in every other part of the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: As the record shows on urgent questions, I almost always call everyone. Today, I fear, that will not be possible and quite a lot of people will not get in, but the shorter the questions, the more who will. I call Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): These warnings from Airbus, other manufacturing companies and, indeed, other sectors are not new to the British Government, as their own economic impact assessment shows that leaving the single market and the customs union will be hugely damaging. Is not the reality that for the Welsh economy the UK’s Brexit policy is a game of Westminster roulette where every chamber is loaded?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman should be more constructive. Given that the whole country—the United Kingdom—voted to leave the European Union, we should be engaged in making sure that we have the best deal possible. I talk regularly with colleagues in Wales about what is required in the terms of that agreement. He should contribute to that, rather than wishing away the results of a referendum that clearly he did not want.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): If Airbus makes good on its ridiculous threats—and I do not think it will for one minute—how much of the billions of pounds of taxpayer subsidy, paid for by the British taxpayer, would it have to pay back?

Greg Clark: I disagree with my hon. Friend. I think that the company has set out what it requires to be agreed in the negotiations so that it can continue to prosper. It is true that the company, like most companies in the aerospace sector, has been part of a successful investment with the Government in innovation and training. That is one foundation of our success, and I very much want that to continue.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Fourteen thousand jobs directly affected; over 100,000 in the supply chain, including in our crucial aerospace cluster in Wolverhampton. What does the Secretary of State think is in the minds of leading Brexiteers when they hear warnings like this, which are anything but ridiculous? Does he think that they take them to the heart, or do they in the end believe that this is a price worth paying, because the overall imperative of controlling immigration comes before any economic or employment consideration?

Greg Clark: My experience gives me confidence that the evidence and the facts will ultimately determine the outcome of the negotiations; respect for the facts on both sides of the negotiations will be what determines a solution in the interests of both sides. That is what I am determined to pursue. When companies offer evidence, as others are completely free to do, it should be considered in a serious and sober way, and used to inform those discussions.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): The aerospace industry is important to my Tewkesbury constituency. Did the Secretary of State notice, on the day of the announcement, that American company GE Aviation announced that it was going to rebuild its propeller business, which supplies a significant proportion of the world’s propellers, in my constituency of Tewkesbury, here in the United Kingdom? Is that not a vote of confidence in what we are doing?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) pointed out earlier that companies invest here because it is a good place to invest. My hon. Friend’s constituency and the area around it have proved successful because there is a critical mass—a cluster—of related firms. It is important that we do everything we can to ensure that we maintain and add to the strength of that cluster, and I am absolutely determined to do so.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Ideology before jobs; doctrine before the economy. It used to be that the Conservatives were the party of business, but now they are the party of fears. When will the Government give clarity to business and hard-working families, heed warnings, and commit to staying in the single market and the customs union?

Greg Clark: Day in, day out, I meet businesses and persuade them of the advantages of this country. I have to report that one of their concerns is the policies of the hon. Lady’s Front Benchers, which are a very significant deterrent to investment in this country.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Some months ago, when I visited Airbus at Broughton, I was briefed in detail about its considerable investment in both capital and skills for specialised wing work. Is it not a fact that it would be extremely expensive for Airbus if it were ever to contemplate trying to relocate that work, be it to Hamburg or Toulouse?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend takes too pessimistic a view. We do not want Airbus to be located in this country because it is too difficult for the company to go elsewhere; we want it to be here with enthusiasm because this is a good and profitable place to invest. I am determined that the deal we secure and the investment we make through our industrial strategy will add to our strengths and make us even more attractive. We should have a counsel of optimism rather than defensive pessimism.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Unlike the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), my constituent Kyle Robinson, a Unite shop steward, works at Broughton every day. He wrote to me this weekend to say that the current situation for him and the families I represent is potentially catastrophic. Will the Secretary of State ensure that when he takes up the invitation from my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) to meet him and the company, the unions get an invite as well?

Greg Clark: The company has good relations with the trade unions and meets them regularly, as indeed do I. The hon. Lady should reflect that when the country took the decision to leave the European Union, there was always going to be a period before the negotiations were concluded when anxieties would be felt. Our purpose and determination is that those negotiations should be
concluded so that there will be confidence to invest in the future and we can create many more jobs for her constituents.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Given what my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said, and given Boeing’s £40 million investment, is it not important that we listen to all voices in this argument, rather than concentrating on one voice, which may have a different view about Brexit, disproportionately more than others?

Greg Clark: Companies in the aerospace sector—big and small—report very similar requirements: we should avoid frictions and tariffs. That is consistent with many other employers who create valuable jobs in this country. It is important that we listen to not just one voice but them all.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Since aerospace regulations tend to be made on a worldwide basis rather than on an EU basis, the tariffs on manufactured goods are low or zero, and the UK is an important market for Airbus. Does the Secretary of State accept that we should take some of these warnings with a pinch of salt? If Airbus has concerns, it ought to direct them towards the EU negotiators who seem to be putting every obstacle in the way of the Prime Minister’s objective of frictionless future trade.

Greg Clark: We need an agreement. The right hon. Gentleman is right that regulatory standards are increasingly international, but the idea that we would find ourselves unable to operate to the standards required for aircraft produced in Europe would be unacceptable not only to Airbus, but to Bombardier in Northern Ireland, which communicated in very similar terms its requirements for the future.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Given that the clear aim of the Government, and indeed Airbus Group, is to achieve a frictionless and zero-tariff exit agreement, has not the statement from Airbus generated more heat than light? Is not the simple truth that we make the engines, wings and landing gear for the Airbus, that it is incredibly important that we continue to do so, and that there is no reason for us not to arrive at an agreement that enables us to do so?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that the House can tell that I regard the prospect of a good agreement as being within our grasp. That is our objective, and it is what this company and many others want from us.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Airbus makes great play in its statement of the need to remain in the European Aviation Safety Agency, because regulating in that way means that planes can fly. What confidence can the Secretary of State give to my constituents, including the chair of the trade union group and the 1,500 people in my patch who work there, that we will still have that proper regulation after Brexit?

Greg Clark: That is precisely what the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech: we want and need to secure an agreement such that we will not require a different set of regulatory standards. I am confident that we will be able to agree that.
Through the industrial strategy, we are taking that forward, and I am determined that we will be able to create markets around the world—including the European Union—for those products to be exported to.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and for his support for businesses on all sides that wish to make their views known, because it is important that our constituents’ jobs are protected. Will he adopt the same pragmatic attitude towards his input into the negotiations and encourage that from all sides, including Brussels?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If one has the privilege, as I and many of us do, of visiting the shop floors and workforces around the country, one sees how important these jobs are. These are good jobs providing careers and opportunities, as well as decent incomes for workers and their families. It is important that we have that always in mind as we approach these negotiations. If we do, a sensible outcome will, I believe, prevail.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Is it not the truth that Airbus has done a great public service by injecting much-needed frankness and realism into this debate, and will the Secretary of State commend it for being willing to do so?

Greg Clark: As I have said to colleagues across the House, Airbus and other companies in the sector, like many other companies, have been very consistent in their approach for many months, including in evidence to Select Committees on which some Members in the Chamber sit. This has caught the country’s attention now, but it is consistent with what the company has been saying for some time.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I declare an interest, having visited the Airbus headquarters recently. Airbus has a manufacturing facility in Alabama, USA, which is outside the customs union. It exchanges products, parts and labour without impediment. Does that not give us hope for the future?

Greg Clark: In the context of Europe, the company’s arrangements are remarkably effective. It combines products from neighbouring EU countries and, in many cases and in many markets, beats the competition hands down. Why would we want to disturb something that works?

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Bristol, home of Concorde, is proud of its aerospace industry, to which Airbus is critical. It is also critical to the provision of good apprenticeships in my constituency. How will the Secretary of State’s industrial strategy be delivered if companies such as Airbus are not here?

Greg Clark: Not only will Airbus be here, but it will be expanding its operation and recruiting more apprentices for very successful careers.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State’s firm restatement of a properly Conservative position that respects business and puts pragmatism above ideology? Will he make sure that the same applies to negotiations on our key services sector, which represents 80% of the economy?

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It was a Tory Government who shed more than 8,000 jobs at Shotton in 1980—the biggest lay-off in one day in British industrial history. We will see history repeat itself, with 6,500 jobs lost at Broughton, if the Secretary of State does not pull his finger out. Why are he and his party prepared to sacrifice those Airbus workers’ jobs and futures for party political ideology?

Greg Clark: I am not, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about job losses, he should refer to the periods when his party has been in power and the devastation to the economy that that has caused. We are determined that industries that are successful now will be successful in the future. The policies of Labour Front Benchers, which are seemingly predicated on the idea that if it works, it has to be subsidised, and if it still works, it has to be nationalised, will attract no confidence in this country.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Has the Secretary of State noticed that the European Union sells us £100 billion more in goods than the other way around? Does that not underlie that, rather than following the defeatedism of the Labour party, we should be bold and courageous in putting forward maximum facilitation and trade with the EU?

Greg Clark: Given my hon. Friend’s constituency, he knows the importance of having no frictions at the border. As he describes, there is a common interest between the two sides of the negotiations, which I am sure will lead to a successful outcome.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Health Secretary said that it was “completely inappropriate” for businesses such as Airbus to make warnings about moving jobs because of Brexit. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Health Secretary was wrong and that, in a democratic country, it is entirely appropriate for such businesses to raise their concerns? What will he do to protect the thousands of jobs in the aerospace sector in the north-west and across the country that will be put at significant risk if the Government pursue their plan of leaving the customs union and single market?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Having visited the Airbus facility in Bristol, I am pleased to note the tone and nature of the Secretary of State’s remarks. Will he...
confirm that the aviation industry is increasingly working on a global basis—there are even direct flights from here to Australasia now—and that that will not change after Brexit?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to be able to take advantage of increasing global opportunities, but to do so without losing the advantages that we have from what have been very successful trading relationships within Europe.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): When the Secretary of State said that there should be no unnecessary friction, was he referring to discussions within the Cabinet or to the economy?

**Greg Clark:** When a matter is complex and requires a forensic attention to what companies require, there will of course be discussions, and sometimes people will not agree with each other. What is important is for those discussions to be concluded in a way that is productive for the whole economy.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I apologise to remaining colleagues, but we must move on. I am sure that this matter will arise again, and that those who were not called today will have a chance next time.

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**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (**Urgent Question**): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the Government’s childhood obesity strategy.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):** Today the Government published the second chapter of our childhood obesity plan. The plan is informed by the latest evidence. It sets a new national ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030.

Childhood obesity is one of the biggest health problems that the country faces. Nearly a quarter of children are overweight or obese before they start school, and the proportion rises to more than a third by the time they leave. The burden is being felt hardest in the most deprived areas, with children growing up in low-income households more likely to be overweight or obese than more affluent children.

Childhood obesity has profound effects, which are compromising children’s physical and mental health both now and in the future. We know that obese children are more likely to experience bullying, stigma and low self-esteem. They are also more likely to become obese adults, and face an increased risk of developing some forms of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and heart and liver disease. Obesity is placing unsustainable costs on the national health service and our UK taxpayers, which are currently estimated to be about £6.1 billion per year. The total costs to society are higher and are estimated to be about £27 billion per year, although some estimates are even higher than that.

The measures that we outline today are intended to address the heavy promotion and advertising of food and drink products that are high in fat, salt and sugar, on television, online and in shops, and to equip parents with the information that they need in order to make healthy, informed decisions about the food that they and their children eat when they are out and about. We are also promoting a new national ambition for all primary schools to adopt an “active mile” initiative, like the Daily Mile. We will be launching a trailblazer programme, working closely with local authorities to show what can be achieved and to find solutions to problems created by barriers at a local level.

Childhood obesity is a complex issue that has been decades in the making, and we recognise that no single action or plan will help us to solve the challenge on its own. Our ambition requires a concerted effort and a united approach by businesses, local authorities, schools, health professionals, and families up and down the country. I look forward to working with them all.

**Jonathan Ashworth:** We have a childhood obesity crisis, and we need action.

Of course, many of the policies announced today seem familiar. That is because they are actually our policies. Supporting the Daily Mile initiative is a Labour policy. Supporting a ban on the sale of energy drinks to under-16s is a Labour policy. Proper food labelling is a Labour policy. A target of halving childhood obesity is
But we were always clear that chapter 1 was the start of the conversation—the clue is in the name—and we are very clear that more needs to be done; that is why I said what I said in my opening remarks. That is why we are introducing the bold new measures outlined in chapter 2. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not like consultations, but what could be described as delay through consultations I would describe as getting it right, and I expect that we will come on to discuss some of these measures in the coming minutes. But we must get these measures right and make sure people cannot duck underneath them.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman spoke about public health. We are spending £16 billion in the ring-fenced public health budget during this spending review. There are many good examples of local councils doing excellent things with that money, and we will probably hear about some of them as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order It is unsurprising that there is significant interest in this matter, but in order to facilitate timely progress to the ministerial statement, and indeed to the subsequent debate which I can advise the House to the subsequent debate which I can advise the House.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly welcome the second chapter of the childhood obesity plan, which takes us so much further in a number of areas. Can my hon. Friend the Minister set out the timescale for these consultations and confirm that the responses will be considered in a timely manner, treating this with the urgency it deserves?

Steve Brine: Yes, and may I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for the work she has done on this? Ever since we came into Parliament together she has been championing this issue—long before it was fashionable. I might add—and she has really led the line with her Select Committee inquiry on it, to which I and other Ministers joining me on the Front Bench today, including the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), have evidence. With most, if not all, of the consultations we are not hanging about; they will be getting under way this year.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This is a ticking time bomb that needs to be dealt with properly. We know that children from deprived backgrounds are twice as likely to suffer from obesity, so I first want to ask the Minister how this ties in with his plans to tackle poverty. The Scottish Government’s ambition to halve obesity in Scotland by 2030 and initiatives such as the Daily Mile are extremely important in addressing this. Those initiatives have received the backing of Jamie Oliver, who has stated that Scotland “has picked up the baton that Westminster dropped”.

The Scottish Government will support small and medium-sized enterprises that have innovative ideas for junk food alternatives. What support will the UK Government be giving to companies founded to offer alternatives to
fatty foods? Does the Minister agree that restricting the powers of the Scottish Parliament to lead the way on legislation on food safety, labelling and health claims could severely restrict Scotland’s ability to lead the way in this area?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for what I think was her welcome for this. Looking at the letter on the comprehensive strategy to tackle childhood obesity that was sent to the Prime Minister on 25 April and signed by her leader, the First Minister of Scotland, I have ticked alongside the bullet points and I reckon that 80% or possibly 90% of the things that her leader has asked for are in this plan. She has asked about inequality, for example, and we have the lowest levels of inequality in 30 years. I am not going to get into the devolution arguments, but I will say that we welcome the North Star policy that the Scottish Government have announced, with the support of Jamie Oliver—who, I might add, has been very supportive and helpful throughout this process. We matched that, but the difference is that we have a plan for how we are going to get there.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council is already leading in Leicestershire in the areas of prevention strategy and tackling obesity? Chapter 2 will be widely welcomed. Has he considered talking to supermarkets about healthy shopping strategies?

Steve Brine: I cannot say that I have considered that personally, but I know about lots of the technology solutions that supermarkets are bringing in. I am not surprised to hear the news about my hon. Friend’s local council, and yes, this is absolutely about prevention. Last week, the Prime Minister announced a record investment of new money in the NHS, alongside our new long-term plan, of £20.5 billion a year, but that must go hand in hand with prevention. Investment and prevention are always better than cure.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I also warmly welcome these proposals. These have been asks of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes and of Diabetes UK for a number of years. There is a clear link between childhood obesity and diabetes, and 4.1 million people in the UK suffer from diabetes. Does the Minister agree that retailers do not have to wait for the consultation? As with the sugar tax, they can start to make the changes now to prevent diabetes in the future.

Steve Brine: Yes, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for this. Diabetes UK has said:

“Diabetes UK welcomes the ambitious range of measures outlined by the government in their commitment to tackling the childhood obesity crisis facing the UK.”

Its brilliant chief executive, Chris Askew, has been very supportive of this plan. This is one of the drivers of the need to tackle this issue, and no, nobody has to wait for this. There have been many examples, and I am happy to name-check Waitrose, which took the lead on not selling energy drinks to children. Its example was followed by all the other mainline supermarkets.
I am sure, in other areas represented by colleagues, local authorities are often actively engaged in making sure that breastfeeding is a very important part of a child’s start in life.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It was the drive and passion of Alderman Eric van der Burg, a right-wing politician, that led to results in bringing down child obesity in Amsterdam. What more do we need to do to get local authority leaders here to see that this is actually part of their core business, not a fringe activity?

Steve Brine: As my hon. Friend will remember from my speaking to the Health Committee, I have also been to Amsterdam, but unfortunately not for as long as the Committee members were. The whole-systems approach taken by Mayor van der Burg and Amsterdam is very impressive and has resulted in a 13% reduction in child obesity. Local authorities can learn from their attempts to market their cities, areas and regions, and I would suggest that having a good, healthy community and a good, healthy look when people walk out of the airport and do not see massive adverts for unhealthy fast food is an important part of that.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome the Minister’s statement. Will he encourage supermarkets to offer free fruit to kids coming into the store? Nothing has changed my supermarket shop more than my local store doing so; when kids go in, they now ask for their free Clementine rather than their chocolate.

Steve Brine: That is an easy one to agree with. Tesco has been doing that for years, and my children regularly avail themselves of the opportunity.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I urge the Minister not to get into some nanny state, socialist claptrap arms race with the Opposition parties, which will never be satisfied, as we heard earlier from the shadow Secretary of State? May I remind the Minister that he is actually supposed to be a Conservative and urge him to think about this from a Conservative standpoint, which focuses on things like parental responsibility and not seeking to ban anything that moves?

Steve Brine: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend made that very helpful contribution. I am a Conservative—I said so in my opening remarks—but at the end of the day this is a publicly funded health service that we all believe in and all love. If we want it to celebrate its 140th birthday, we need to protect it, and that means there is business, and the reformulation we are seeing from many, many businesses is impressive and helpful; and there are parents. Parental responsibility is central to this—we cannot do it without them—but we are going to give them information to help them do it.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister’s Conservative Government introduced a tax on sugary drinks, which worked because, as we know, manufacturers have reformulated their drinks. Why does he not accept that the voluntary approach to high-sugar food is not working? Why does he not introduce regulation to cut sugar in the high-sugar foods marketed at families?

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady and I went through this at oral questions just last Tuesday. There is a two-part approach: the stick and the carrot. As a carrot, we have a sugar-reduction programme on fizzy drinks, and my colleagues at Public Health England are doing a calorie-reduction programme—working closely with the industry, and with great success, to reduce calories through changes to recipes and portion sizes, for instance. Yes, sometimes the Government need to wave a stick, but there are also times when they need to encourage and to help along the way. We are going to do both.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): At a time when families are struggling with the cost of living, I urge my hon. Friend to make sure that these measures do not increase prices, which hit those on the lowest incomes the most.

Steve Brine: I have been very aware of that throughout the drawing together of this plan. For instance, we do not propose to ban “children eat free” offers. We are talking about food and drink price promotions, such as two-for-one multi-buy deals in the retail and the out-of-home sector, to prevent needless consumption and to help parents with pester power—with which I am incredibly familiar, as I have a 10-year-old and a seven-year-old.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The challenge is about both prevention and cure. We need to act now to help the growing numbers of children who are already obese, but in its recent inquiry the Health and Social Care Committee heard that provision of tier-3 and tier-4 services is bare. It concluded:

“Addressing health inequalities must include providing help for those children who are already obese.”

What is the Minister going to do about the commissioning of tier-3 and tier-4 services?
Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is not just about some future generation; it is about the generation now that is already too big. It is about helping people through a sugar-reduction programme, a calorie-reduction programme and—something we have not yet talked about—the Daily Mile and the activity programme we see in so many schools in my constituency, and I am sure in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. That will help children in the future, and it will certainly help children now. It is never too late.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s proposals, and I am grateful to see much more of that in England.

Steve Brine: It was a pleasure to visit my right hon. Friend’s constituency to see our local plans for coping and dealing with childhood obesity. Chapter 2 is a good plan. Does he agree that targeting sedentary lifestyles is a top priority, and that to do so we need parental involvement?

Steve Brine: It is a pleasure to visit my right hon. Friend’s constituency to see how Bexley Council is using its power, money and public health grant—the council made it very clear to me that it would like more, and my right hon. Friend is a very good advocate on the council’s behalf—to bring forward a whole community response like the one I saw in Amsterdam. I would like to see much more of that in England.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We have heard that obesity is caused not only by the wrong food but by a lack of exercise. Far too few children walk or cycle to school. Will the Minister engage with all our schools to make sure we have proper, realistic travel plans in place so that many more children walk or cycle to school?

Steve Brine: Yes. The Daily Mile happens when children are in school, but getting to school is important. I work with Sustrans, a charity, quite a lot in my constituency, as I am sure many Members do. It works to help children to cycle and scoot to school. That is very important, and the hon. Lady is right to raise it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) is starting to resemble a runner who is literally itching to get out of the starting blocks.

Robert Courts: As the father of a two-year-old, I am increasingly concerned about the sedentary lifestyles that children lead. Will the Minister join me in praising Middle Barton, Great Rollright, Queen Emma’s, Clanfield and Stanton Harcourt primary schools in West Oxfordshire, which have signed up to the Daily Mile programme? Will he encourage others to do the same?

Steve Brine: My hon. Friend will have enjoyed that contribution; I suspect his office are clipping it as we speak. We have a national ambition for every primary school to adopt an active mile initiative, such as the Daily Mile, as a result of this plan. I visited Western Church of England Primary School in my constituency recently, which has good plans to do that. This week is National School Sport Week. I will be at my sports day on Friday, taking part—as I am sure you will be at some point, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s virtue is boundless; he is truly a person of the people. I am sure he is a very popular parent at the school—I have no reason to doubt it.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On Friday, I met Councillor Hazel Malcolm, Wolverhampton’s cabinet member for public health. We discussed this challenge for the city, where, unfortunately and sadly, the child obesity problem is often worst in the lowest income wards. The Minister has mentioned the Daily Mile a few times during this statement. What can he do to make this more than something there are warm words about and to roll it out in schools so that children get the benefit?

Steve Brine: The education team are working very closely on this, and the Minister for School Standards wrote a very good piece in The Sunday Times about it. [Interruption.] Indeed, the children’s Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), is right here on the Bench with us. We are encouraging all schools to take part in the initiative and we have a national ambition for it. There is no reason why schools in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency cannot do it, as is the case for schools in my constituency and those of other Members.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, want to welcome the Daily Mile initiative. We should not be arguing about who was first to introduce it; I know we are competitive, but this is competitive for the schools. Does the Minister agree that any sporting activity in schools should be encouraged? Does he also agree that the social prescribing of sporting activities could also play its part in tackling this obesity crisis?

Mr Speaker: Any sport, of course, but particularly tennis, I suggest to the Minister.

Steve Brine: Especially tennis, Mr Speaker. I know my hon. Friend is keen on social prescribing, as am I. I recently signed an accord between National Parks England and Public Health England to use the brilliant natural resource of our national parks. They are clearly part of the social prescribing mix that we increasingly see across our country, and I want to see more of it. She is right to raise that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. With 25% of children overweight in Northern Ireland, will he confirm how he intends to work cross-departmentally there in the absence of a working devolved Assembly? We need a strategy that works for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Steve Brine: Yes. Some of the measures in this strategy relate to reserved matters, such as the advertising proposals that I have spoken about. I have been speaking to my officials, who are already talking to officials in Stormont and will be helping them to develop their own plans. I know they have been very interested in what we are doing, and I hope they can copy and follow some of this locally.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Community sports clubs, such as the Cary Park tennis club in Torquay, play a large role in making children active and encouraging them to participate in activity. Will the Minister confirm that looking at these sorts of groups will be part of the strategy—to get people active, not just to tackle what they are eating?

Steve Brine: Yes, that is part of the strategy, in so much as we want local authorities to be involved, and upper tier authorities in England are all now public health authorities in their own right. There is absolutely no reason why sports clubs, which are plentiful in all of our constituencies, should not be a key part of the active lives agenda. Not just children need to do more activity in our country; all of us do.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Minister for the inclusion of both physical exercise and diet in this. Of course physical exercise is vital for mental health as well as physical health. Is the ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 ambitious enough, given that this is such an important issue for the future of not only the children, but our health service?

Steve Brine: I think it is very ambitious. Our first plan was world-leading and I outlined some of the things it has achieved. I think this plan is ambitious enough at the moment. We say in the plan that it is chapter 2 and that there will be a chapter 3—and no doubt there will be.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): As 80% of children are not doing the recommended minimum of exercise, we owe it to them to do better than make political gestures. In stark contrast to when the Labour Government devastated school sport, will the Minister commit to making it an absolute priority to work with the Department for Education to unlock school sports facilities for free after school and in the school holidays for sports groups and parents, in order to provide opportunities?

Steve Brine: I spoke earlier about the Government’s doubling of the primary PE and sport premium to £320 million per year, which is very important. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue. I will of course work with all my colleagues across Government to implement the plan and to do even better than we currently are.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Obesity harms the life chances of too many children. Given the Minister’s encouragement earlier, will he join me in praising schools such as Lytchett Matravers Primary School, which has already set up a Daily Mile scheme, and encourage others to follow suit?

Steve Brine: Yes.
Taking all the costs together, I have been advised by analysts that by 2050 the proposal that was made, which could generate around 30 TWh of electricity per year, could cost up to £20 billion more to produce, compared with generating that same electricity through a mix of offshore wind and nuclear, once financing, operating and system costs have been taken into account. That could cost the average British household consumer up to an additional £700 between 2031 and 2050, or the equivalent of £15,000 for every household in Wales. However, in recognition of the potential local economic benefits that might result from a lagoon in Swansea, I asked officials to go back to consider what additional benefit could be ascribed to a number of other factors, including a beneficial impact on the local economy. For £1.3 billion, a Swansea lagoon would support, according to the Hendry review, only 28 jobs directly associated with operating and maintaining the lagoon in the long term.

Officials were also asked to make an assessment of the potential for valuable innovation and cost reductions for future lagoons that might come from embarking on a programme of construction. Independent advice concluded that the civil engineering used in Swansea bay offers limited scope for innovation and capital cost reduction—estimated at 5%—in the construction of subsequent facilities.

I asked for an assessment of the export potential of embarking on a programme of implementing the technology, but the Hendry review concluded that it would take “a leap of faith to believe that the UK would be the main industrial beneficiary” of any such programme. On energy reliability, the generation of electricity would be variable rather than constant, with a load factor of 19% compared with around 50% for offshore wind and 90% for nuclear.

The inescapable conclusion of an extensive analysis is that, however novel and appealing the proposal that has been made is, even with these factors taken into account, the costs that would be incurred by consumers and taxpayers would be so much higher than alternative sources of low carbon power that it would be irresponsible to enter into a contract with the provider. Securing our energy needs into the future has to be done seriously and when much cheaper alternatives exist no individual project and no particular technology can proceed at any price. That is true for all technologies. The fact that this proposal has not demonstrated that it could be value for money does not mean that its potential is not recognised. My Department is also in receipt of proposals from other promoters of tidal energy schemes that are said to have lower costs than the Swansea proposal, although these are at an earlier stage of development. Any proposals must be able credibly to demonstrate value for money for consumers and public funds.

I am sure that many people in the House and beyond would wish that we were in a position today to say yes to the Swansea proposals. I have appreciated the contribution of Charles Hendry, whose constructive report led to this further analysis being made, and the engagement of the Secretary of State for Wales and Members of the Welsh Assembly, including the First Minister and the Leader of the Welsh Conservatives, Andrew R. T. Davies. All of us have a requirement to be responsible stewards of taxpayers’ and consumers’ money and to act at all times in their interests. It is in discharging that responsibility rigorously that I make this statement today, and I commend it to the House.

5.2 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the somewhat late advance sight of his statement—I think we understand why—and give the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who would normally respond to this statement, but who is a victim of the Transport Secretary’s failure to run the trains on time; a failed policy if ever there was one. I am afraid that this statement is evidence of yet another failed Government policy; it is a missed opportunity for the domestic economy and for our export potential.

The Government really should be ashamed about what we have heard from the Secretary of State today. When he announced the cancellation of the project, my hon. Friends said, “Shame”. They were right to do so as this is indeed shameful. It is another broken promise by the Conservative party—we have seen lots of those recently, too. I remind the House that, in 2015, the Conservative manifesto committed to building the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. The Government appointed Charles Hendry to produce a report to do just that. It has been one year, five months and 14 days since he published his final report. The report stated:

“The aim now is that we should move to secure the pathfinder project as swiftly as possible.”

During this time, the Minister has received letters signed by more than 100 MPs from all parts of the House in support of the project, along with interventions and questions indicating the strength of feeling in this place. There has been unanimous support from across industry, but the handling of the project by this Government has been atrocious. Not only have the Government taken an inordinate amount of time to come to the House; hon. Members, Tidal Lagoon Power, the Welsh Government, the trade unions and other stakeholders have been left to find out about development through leaks in the press.

It emerged in a joint hearing of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Welsh Affairs Committee last month that a BEIS Minister had not spoken to Tidal Lagoon Power for 16 months. Will the Secretary of State set out how we can trust his word that he wants to talk to other marine developers and bring forward the other projects to which he referred in passing, when his Department has not even spoken to Tidal Lagoon Power for more than a year? This is no way for the Government to conduct themselves over an issue that is so important for Wales, our environment and the whole wider UK economy.

Approving the lagoon would have been a positive step, taken by a Government with a clear vision for the future, willing to lead the way in new, innovative technology and strongly supporting British industry. It would have been a step taken by a Government able to provide businesses with certainty in uncertain times, rather than the insulting, undermining and questioning rhetoric that we have heard from the Secretary of State’s Cabinet colleagues. We have heard a lot from him and his colleagues about the industrial strategy and supporting new technologies, revitalising our manufacturing sector, encouraging UK-based supply chains and creating jobs...
outside London. Well, so much for that industrial strategy. Swansea Bay tidal lagoon could have helped to deliver on each of these objectives, so will the Secretary of State outline which assessment criteria were used to decide against the project, over and above a simple cost calculation?

The project would have required 100,000 tonnes of steel, with a significant proportion expected to be produced nearby at Port Talbot. It would have used first-of-a-kind, precision-engineered, bi-directional turbines, with the vast majority of components built in the UK, establishing new UK-based supply chains. It would have created more than 2,300 jobs in Swansea and paved the way for the creation of a new domestic industry with substantial export potential. The Hendry review was commissioned by the Government. Given that the Secretary of State is ignoring his own review, what alternative analysis did he carry out to support his decision to cancel the project? That this Government, especially in the excessive time that they have taken to make a decision, do not value the wider benefits of the project is disappointing to say the least.

One very good way of offsetting the impact on climate change of expanding airport capacity would be to expand renewable energy production. Is not it remarkably ironic that this statement has been made on the same day as the Heathrow vote? There is a fine judgment to be made that this statement has been made on the same day as renewable energy production. Is not it remarkably ironic to say the least.

The hon. Gentleman knows that our record on innovation has always been a matter of complete indifference to him. Is there any limit at all to what he would make consumers pay? The Swansea lagoon would cost three times as much—I repeat, three times as much—as having the same electricity generated by offshore wind here in the UK. The whole tidal programme would cost £50 billion when we could have the same amount from wind for nearer to £20 billion. Is it Labour’s policy to charge £700 per household more than is needed in the first place? As for economic development in Wales, it would be cheaper to write a cheque for £15,000 to every single household in Wales than to subsidise this particular proposal. I am afraid that his response sums up the approach of spending whatever it takes, no matter how wasteful of consumers’ and taxpayers’ money that is.

The hon. Gentleman talks about industrial strategy, but the clue is in the word “strategy”. A strategy does not spray consumers’, or taxpayers’ money on any proposal—it requires a rigorous assessment. We are a leader in offshore wind because we took a decision to focus on a technology for which costs could come down and there was a massive global market in which we could create jobs. What he proposes would reverse that by doling out subsidy to whoever asks loudest, rather than what has been rigorously assessed. That is not strategic.

In summary, Labour would pay £700 per household for less reliable electricity, fewer exports from offshore wind and fewer jobs, including in East Anglia, on Teesside and in Scotland—and, yes, in Wales and Northern Ireland, too. It would saddle taxpayers with a decommissioning cost of over £1 billion. We will always put the interests of taxpayers, and working people who pay bills, first. I would hope that a responsible Opposition would acknowledge the seriousness of the analysis that has been made and recognise that its conclusion is rigorous.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Even Conservative Members who have been the strongest supporters of the lagoon project have always known that there was a serious value-for-money question to be answered. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that every single avenue was explored to try to find a financial solution to make this happen, and that today’s announcement does not close the door on future investment in tidal and wave power that would give us reliable, clean energy into the 21st century and beyond?

Greg Clark: I can confirm that. Anyone who has concentrated on this proposal and seen the assessment that has been made would conclude that my hon. Friends and I have left no stone unturned in looking at all possibilities that might improve the economic case. However, when the conclusion is that something is so much more expensive than other low-carbon technologies, we have to follow that evidence and protect consumers and taxpayers from paying so much more than they need to pay. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we continue to believe in innovation. We have spent £100 million on new energy research and development. We will continue to do that. We have had other proposals that suggest they would be cheaper. I am very happy to continue to work with other promoters of schemes to see whether what would be an attractive proposal can be implemented in a way that would be value for money.
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Eighteen months ago, an independent review commissioned by the UK Government said that moving ahead with the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon would be a “no regrets policy”. Well, plenty of people are regretting this decision today. The Welsh Government were willing to put £200 million into the scheme if it went ahead. It was described as a world-leading opportunity to establish Wales as a centre for expertise and manufacturing, and a long-term source of low-carbon energy. This statement is, yet again, pulling the plug on a Tory promise.

In Scotland, we know how Wales feels. We witnessed the promised £1 billion for carbon capture and storage in Peterhead being pulled for no good reason, stunning both the public and the companies that had bought into the promise, surrendering the technological lead, and costing the taxpayer £100 million. Now it is back—it is flavour of the month—but, of course, grossly underfunded. Here we go again.

The Secretary of State hides behind the scale when making the comparison. He says that he cares about consumers, but this Government are happy to see bill payers paying through the nose for the calamitously bad deal that is Hinkley C. The Government’s disastrous deal with EDF on the strike price will see them pay at least £30 billion over 35 years. At a time when offshore wind strike prices are dropping dramatically, they seem to waste more and more on failing nuclear.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that this and other renewable support is being withdrawn in order to subsidise the likes of Hitachi’s Wylfa nuclear plant? That company has requested loans and guarantees of £12 billion, as per the secret negotiations. Will he admit that this is yet another mistake, and will he have the backbone to categorically rule out any other public bail-outs for failing, costly and desperate nuclear providers?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman represents a country that has prospered from the development of the offshore wind industry. The truth is that if a decision had been taken to subsidise this proposal, that money would have come out of the budget for offshore wind, which would have led to job losses in Scotland and elsewhere around the United Kingdom. He mentions a proposed subsidy. The truth is that if a project that is not viable is subsidised by the taxpayer, it is simply a taxpayer-subsidised unviable project. That is no basis on which a project can be approved.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the nuclear power programme. If he regards the price agreed for the power from Hinkley Point C as too high, that is all the more reason for him to oppose this proposal, because it is so much costlier. He must accept that there is a responsibility for the use of consumers’ and taxpayers’ money that comes with being in office. When a proposal is so out of kilter with what can offer value for money, the necessary decision must be made, and he should respect that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I accept that, on the Secretary of State’s figures, this would be a very bad investment, but can he tell us about the amortisation period of the investment? Surely a barrage will last a lot longer than, say, a wind farm. Will he explain why his advisers think that the project would generate so little power on a not very reliable basis, given the reliability of the tides?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is correct to point to the amortisation. As someone who has spent a career in finance, he is aware that in discounting the value of earnings in future generations, the great majority of the value is in the earlier years, and that has been the standard basis of the assessment made. What has not been taken into account is the prospective decommissioning cost of the proposed lagoon, which has been estimated at £1 billion. That has not been included in the analysis, but it would be a further liability for the taxpayer.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I have to say that I am slightly surprised by the Secretary of State’s tone. In answer to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), he said that this project was “so out of kilter” with other ways of producing energy and that the costs are much higher. In that case, can I gently ask why on earth it has taken five years to come to this decision? What lessons has the Secretary of State learned from the decision-making process around the tidal lagoon project? Frankly, a lot of effort has been put into this project by business, the Welsh Government and others, and I think that many people have lost confidence in the Government’s programme for renewables because of this.

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady will know, as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, that the Government’s programme of renewables has resulted in the biggest reduction in the cost of the deployment of renewables that we have seen in this country, and that deployment has increased threefold. The success of that strategy is evident. I was asked by many Members, the Welsh Government and many businesses to make sure that every aspect that could contribute to a value-for-money case had been considered—the impact locally, the prospects for exports and the prospects for innovation—and it was right to do so and to leave no stone unturned. I think that that was the right approach, and when the Select Committee scrutinises the decision, I think it will regard the process as having been exhaustive and rigorous.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the relentless criticism by environmental groups and Opposition Members of the £92.50 per megawatt-hour strike price for Hinkley—not least in this House a few weeks ago—has made it virtually impossible for any Government ever to agree to pay a higher strike price than £92.50, and that this project was coming in at a significantly higher price, according to the person responsible for it?

Greg Clark: I saw the evidence given to the Committee inquiry chaired by my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). He is right that we made a commitment, in approving Hinkley Point C, that future projects had to come in at a lower price. I think it is the case that evidence to the inquiry cited a strike price on a comparable basis of not £92.50, but £150, which demonstrates the force of my hon. Friend’s point.
Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I was Secretary of State for Energy when the tidal lagoon story began, so may I tell the current Secretary of State with responsibility for energy that his statement is wrong, wrong, wrong? The evidence that the price of future tidal lagoons would fall dramatically after the first lagoon at Swansea is overwhelming. That was exactly what happened with other renewable technologies, including offshore wind, as he has admitted. Will he promise the House today that he will publish every scrap of evidence and analysis that he has used to take this decision, and hold a debate in Government time on that analysis and evidence?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman will see from the analysis, and indeed from the conclusions that Charles Hendry and others have pointed to, that the technology inherent in the construction of the lagoon programme—whether building sea walls or the turbines—is not subject to the same degree of cost reduction as other energy technologies. We will be very open about this and publish whatever is not covered by a non-disclosure agreement with the companies concerned. He is, of course, welcome to scrutinise that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Secretary of State has been very thorough in answering questions but, as the House can see, a great many people wish to ask questions. We have about 20 minutes left for the statement, which will allow everyone to get in if we can have just short questions and short answers.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I have to say that this is a sad day for Swansea, for Gloucester—the home of Tidal Lagoon Power plc—and, indeed, for other innovative sources of marine energy more widely. Since the project was entirely financed by entrepreneurs and institutional investors, not by the Government, the only real point of argument was the price at which the Government were prepared to buy the energy through the grid. Will the Secretary of State tell us at what price he would have approved the Swansea project? Will he assure me that other marine energy projects, such as those in my constituency and across the country, will not be jeopardised and crowded out by the price of wind today, and that there is a level playing field for innovation in marine energy?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman would accept that the commitment that I have given to pursue alternative energy sources, including projects in his constituency, has been clearly demonstrated. Of course we are open to innovation—we fund innovation. The assessment by independent experts is that the prospective cost reduction for this technology is not the same as that enjoyed by offshore wind. When it comes to future proposals, of course I will consider them rigorously, and if they can demonstrate value for money they can be contenders.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Like many others on both sides of the House, I am disappointed that the Swansea tidal lagoon and associated lagoons are not economically viable. The Government have responsibility to protect the interests of consumers who pay electricity bills. What we all want to hear from the Secretary of State is that he is committed to looking at other schemes that might offer the potential to use tidal energy around our coasts and the power of the production of our marine environment in which our islands live.

Greg Clark: I will. I welcome my hon. Friend’s remarks. We have a substantial programme of investment in innovation. Indeed, when it comes to the costs, to pay £30 billion more than is required to generate the same amount of electricity crowds out the ability to fund genuine projects that can reduce the price of energy.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Swansea Bay tidal lagoon is in my constituency. The Secretary of State will never understand the frustration and anger felt in my city today. It prompts the question of just who is speaking for Wales in the Cabinet, because it is certainly not the Secretary of State for Wales. We have not had electrification; we have not had the tidal lagoon. If he does not do the job properly, it is time to move on, I fear.

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has been vigorously engaged in making sure that every aspect of the analysis of this project has been conducted, including the impact on the local economy. The hon. Lady is familiar with the figures and the economics of the project, and because she is aware of the proposal she knows of its distance from being value for money, which causes higher bills for her constituents, including intensive energy users such as the steelworks in south Wales, which is something that any responsible Government have to take into account. I think she knows that this has been done in a rigorous way.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The question is not simply about cost, although that is important, but about energy security. Tidal lagoons are one of the best and most secure ways, under British control, of ensuring that we generate power for the future. Will the Secretary of State please have a look at this again?
**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Part of the role of government is that a Secretary of State will have a vision for delivering and a vision for ideas. The Secretary of State has shown today that he does not have any vision for delivering services and improvements to the economy for the people of south Wales. We have had the scrapping of electrification and we are clearly no further forward with various projects the British Government can fund. Can we have a guarantee from the Secretary of State about when the British Government are going to start investing, so that the people of Wales can have some faith? All he is proving right now is that, with the Welsh Secretary and the British Government, the Tories really are failing Wales.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his very sensible decision. Will he confirm that it would have put an additional 31p on every household’s bill in my constituency every year for up to 65 years, leading to £370,000 a year flowing out of my constituency on energy bills to pay for this uneconomic project?

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon would also have been in my constituency. I can tell the Secretary of State that today the people of Aberavon see this as yet another betrayal of the interests of the people of Wales. They also understand that the project would have had tremendous benefits for the steel industry. Will the Secretary of State today please promise to publish the cost-benefit analysis for the steel industry and the massive opportunity cost of not going ahead both for the steel industry and the steel supply chain? Will he publish that information?

**Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I can say that value for money is very important to the House and should always be, and I accept the Secretary of State’s assessment in this regard. However, will he confirm to and reassure the House that the Government are not giving up on marine energy or renewable energy, and set out further plans in due course?

**Greg Clark:** Of course we look at energy security, and having a diverse energy supply is important. In so doing we have to look at the contribution that is being made, and it is much more cost-effective to diversify our energy by commissioning sources that, in many cases, are a third cheaper than what is proposed. We can do more of it if we adhere to value for money.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): This announcement will be met with widespread anger in the communities that I represent, and it is the second broken promise from the 2015 Tory manifesto on top of the cancellation of electrification. Will the Secretary of State outline how detailed the discussions were with the Welsh Government regarding joint equity in the project? If the Welsh Government determined that they wanted to increase their equity share and go it alone, would the British Government stand in their way?

**Greg Clark:** The commitment given was to enter into discussions to see whether the project could be financed. We have done that rigorously, including with the Welsh Government. I think there have been more than 10 meetings with the Welsh Government this year alone to consider whether this was possible and to make sure we were looking at every possibility. The conclusion we have drawn is that it cannot be justified in terms of value for money. It was right to work with the Welsh Government to look at all the possibilities, but we have to abide by the conclusions of a serious analysis.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State’s statement will have been listened to with great concern at GE Power Conversion in Rugby, which would have manufactured the turbines for the tidal lagoon. A great deal of development has been done there within a mostly British supply chain. UK manufacturing missed out on the manufacturing of wind turbines because of a lack of a commitment to the sector in its early years. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is important that we do not miss out on the manufacturing opportunities that can arise from harnessing tidal power?

**Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I am disappointed that the Secretary of State does not seem to understand that the Government are not just responsible for stewardship of taxpayers’ money. Their stewardship of the Earth is what counts here, as does their stewardship of investment in our economy and shepherding an
industry from its nascent stages to something commercially viable. This country has so much potential marine energy. Will the Secretary of State please reiterate his commitment, which he should have, to investing in that marine energy today?

**Greg Clark:** This proposal is not commercially viable and the prospects are that it will not become commercially viable. If technologies are proposed through the test beds and our innovation programme, no one would be more pleased than I to deploy them as part of our energy mix, but we have to take into account the impact on bill payers and taxpayers.

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I confirm that there is also great disappointment from Conservative Members that this scheme is not going ahead, but with disappointment there is also realism. The figures that he quoted make it clear that if the scheme went ahead, the burden on our children and grandchildren would be enormous. He has already confirmed that he is still looking into tidal energy. Will he also confirm that if and when it is suitable to proceed with tidal energy, Swansea and the south Wales coast will be looked at first and foremost for future investment?

**Greg Clark:** Of course. The test is that the deployment of a technology can be done at good value for the taxpayer. That is the challenge for any new technology, and if it can be demonstrated that it meets that challenge I will be very pleased to welcome it.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): The Secretary of State was very specific in the figure that he gave for the number of jobs he expected to be created in operation and maintenance of the lagoon—it was 28. Can he be equally specific about the number of jobs that he has been advised would have been created in the UK-wide supply chain during the construction phase?

**Greg Clark:** The figures are taken from the Hendry report—these are not Government figures; they were laid out there. The number of jobs created during the construction period would have been 2,260, but they would have been for the very limited period of construction. In terms of value for money, of course, the permanent jobs are what needs to be assessed.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure me that he will continue to make these types of decisions based on clear analysis, rather than political convenience?

**Greg Clark:** It has to be the case that when we take decisions that have consequences for consumers and businesses that already face, in energy-intensive industries, high energy costs, we have to act responsibly both for households and the future competitiveness of those companies.

**Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The proposed lagoon off the north Wales coast would have stretched from Llandudno to Prestatyn in my constituency, protecting a very vulnerable coast. In assessing the viability of a tidal lagoon, what recognition does his Department give to the impact of lagoons in combating coastal flooding?

**Greg Clark:** Part of the energy assessment that has been made is what would be the best way to secure our energy supplies of the future competitively and so that costs for taxpayers and bill payers are minimised. As I made clear in my statement, I added to that assessment considerations of the local impact and the prospects. I could not have gone further in embracing all the different aspects, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect that that was the right thing to do.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): It is clear from what the Business Secretary said that this was not even a marginal decision that could have gone either way, and that by a country mile the Government have decided that this scheme is simply not financially viable. What I do not understand is why there is such a big gap in the Business Secretary’s analysis and that of Tidal Lagoon Power Ltd. What is his assessment of why that gap is so wide?

**Greg Clark:** With any proposal, it is important to do due diligence and check the basis of the calculations, and in this case, in so doing, as my hon. Friend stated, we found the gap to be so wide that the proposal could not be responsibly backed. As I have said to hon. Members, however, any proposal that is competitive will be welcomed.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): This is another blatantly broken promise to the people of Wales, but I will leave that aside. The Secretary of State has given umpteen speeches talking about the need for this country to invest in new technologies and innovation and lamenting that we have failed to capitalise on great British ideas in the past. Does he not see the huge gap now between that laudable rhetoric and his short-term accountancy decision today?

**Greg Clark:** Part of the assessment, and part of that which Charles Hendry made in this analysis, was of the technology’s export potential, and a great proportion of the global potential is within this country, so it does not have the potential the hon. Gentleman describes. In fact, Charles Hendry concluded that any benefits from the technology would be limited to design and consultancy, rather than substantial industrial benefits.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): This Government consistently let Wales down, and on this the Secretary of State is completely and utterly wrong. It is his duty to provide leadership here. The National Audit Office states that the lagoon either matches or outperforms Hinkley across its three value-for-money tests. If he supports the tidal industry, how can he not be prepared to support the project that makes it possible?

**Greg Clark:** In terms of support for Wales, for every £100 of public funds spent in England, £120 is spent in Wales, and the NAO, which scrutinises all such decisions and proposals, will find that this one was taken in complete conformity with the standards of probity required.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab) rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** And finally, the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Tonia Antoniazzi.
Tonia Antoniazzi: I have been a teacher in Wales for 20 years, and I am devastated by today’s news. Pupils throughout Wales have been studying an exciting new future promised to Wales by this Government, and now it is not going to happen. The fig leaf of a city deal will not hide the Government’s shortcomings in Swansea. This is a clear dereliction of duty. If they have no aspiration for Wales, what aspiration does the Secretary of State expect for our future generations?

Greg Clark: I am surprised that the hon. Lady would turn her nose up at a £1.3 billion city deal. I would have thought she would welcome it on behalf of her constituents. It does her constituents, young and old, no service to saddle them with energy bills much higher than if we have regard to the price that ordinary people would pay in their bills and which businesses would incur when trading. That is responsible government.
National Policy Statement: Airports


5.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move,

That this House approves the National Policy Statement on New runway capacity and infrastructure at airports in the South East of England, which was laid before this House on 5 June 2018.

This is a very important moment in the history of the House and the history of the country. If the House endorses the proposed national airports policy statement today, it will move on from decades of debate and set what is, to my mind, a clear path to our future as a global nation in the post-Brexit world.

Let me explain to Members what we are doing today. The proposed policy statement does not grant final planning consent; what it does is set the policy against which a promoter of an expanded Heathrow airport can deliver more detailed design and participate in the detailed planning process that can lead to final consent.

I thank the many Members on both sides of the House who have gone on the record to support expansion at Heathrow, and who have made considerable efforts to persuade others of its importance to all nations and regions of the United Kingdom. I know that this debate is divisive for many, but there is also strong support across the House for what I believe is a very important step for our nation, and I am grateful to all those who have been involved in supporting the way forward that I believe is right for our country.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has mentioned divisiveness. I personally think that this development is well overdue, and, although I know that it is not on the cards, I would support a fourth and a fifth runway, at Heathrow and at Gatwick. Does my right hon. Friend accept, however, that—just as with HS2—when constituency matters come into the equation, it is understandable that some people feel that they are unable to vote for this Government motion, and might find themselves called away?

Chris Grayling: I would never criticise any Member for representing the views of his or her constituents. After all, whatever position we may hold in the House, in government or in opposition, we are all ultimately constituency MPs, and it is absolutely right for us to champion the issues that affect our constituents.

I also want to thank people outside the House. It is unusual for me to find myself campaigning on the same side of the argument as Len McCluskey of Unite the Union, but the trade union movement has been a strong supporter of this, as have business groups in all corners of the United Kingdom.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I will join the Secretary of State in the Lobby tonight because I think that the third runway is a piece of infrastructure of national importance that will benefit the whole nation. However, what it must not do is increase the disparity of wealth and income between the regions of this country and London and the south-east. Can the Secretary of State tell us what extra funds he will invest in the regional airports to ensure that they can make their contribution? It cannot be right, at a time when this investment will lead to a great deal of public expenditure in the south-east, that Manchester airport is expected to pay for the station for HS2.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely take on board the hon. Gentleman’s point. Of course Manchester airport is a great success story, and a great international success story. I have been working with the airport management to help it expand its expertise internationally and will continue to do that.

What I would say to reassure the hon. Gentleman is, as he will be aware, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has indicated that the region of the country that will secure the highest proportion of Government spending on transport in the next few years is the north-west. That is right and proper—a sign of our continuing commitment to deliver improvements in the north of this country that are long, long overdue.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right: Members of Parliament have a duty to stand up for their constituents, and I will do just that. Can he confirm that the expansion of Heathrow puts an end to the daft estuary airport idea, and that the long-term provision of air capacity needs can be met at Gatwick?

Chris Grayling: The Airports Commission looked very carefully at the estuary airport concept, concluded that it was not viable and made this recommendation. I see no way how, off the back of an expanded Heathrow, an estuary airport would become a viable option, so I reassure my hon. Friend on that point.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In terms of the benefits for the regions, does the Secretary of State accept that the expansion opens up the opportunity for over 500 jobs for Northern Ireland, £5 billion of economic growth, a £10 million airline route development programme, and a logistics hub that, if based in Northern Ireland, will increase productivity and jobs and make Northern Ireland a key part of this development programme? Does he support that hub being in Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: This project, including the development hub concept that Heathrow has been promoting, will make a contribution to the economy of all parts of the United Kingdom. I know the hon. Gentleman has a keen eye on making sure that the hub goes to Ballymena; I cannot make any promises to the airport on the plan, but I know the hon. Gentleman will carry on making that argument very robustly.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Whether it is pre or post Brexit, does the Secretary of State accept that, to be an open, liberal, market economy, we need an airport that can compete against the likes of Paris, Schiphol, Istanbul, Dubai and Doha? On the issue of the regions, does he accept that Birmingham airport also has a part to play over the skies of the UK?

Chris Grayling: rise—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Secretary of State answers the two questions in that intervention, may I say that interventions should be short and should make one point? Otherwise, it is not fair to Members at the end of the incredibly long list of speakers I have here. Those making interventions now at great length are taking time away from the Members who will be trying to speak, having sat here until after 9 o’clock tonight.

Also, there are lots of conversations going on around the Chamber; perhaps Members are negotiating which way they are going to vote this evening. If they are, will they do so either more quietly or somewhere else? The rest of the House wishes to hear the Secretary of State.

Chris Grayling: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will respond to the last intervention, then take a couple more interventions and then make some progress: as you rightly say, lots of Members want to contribute.

I say in response to my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) that this is absolutely crucial to the UK as a whole. He is right that Birmingham airport is probably the most directly affected, although of course HS2’s arriving at Birmingham airport will create fantastic connections to that great airport from around the country.

Our forecasts show all regional airports growing, which is an indication that we need to provide the capacity at Heathrow. We can do so without damaging the prosperity of the regions. Indeed, it will enhance the prosperity of the regions, as their airports grow and their connections improve.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend should be commended for finally, at long last, bringing forward this vital measure of national infrastructure. Will he confirm that although, according to Sir Howard Davies, London and the south-east will benefit to the tune of £52 billion economically, the north, Birmingham and the rest of the country will benefit to the tune of nearly £80 billion?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is right, and it is interesting how much support there has been from around the whole United Kingdom: not a single regional airport has opposed the expansion of Heathrow, and I have talked to business groups up and down this country, all of whom support the expansion of Heathrow because they believe it will make a huge difference.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Although airport expansion is crucial to our economic success, does my right hon. Friend accept that from 2014 unfortunate changes to the pattern of aviation movements from Heathrow, made without consultation, have created a much worse noise situation over my constituency and adjacent constituencies? Will he ensure that a proper noise reduction programme is in place from now on? We do not like the existing level of noise, let alone an expanded one.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand my right hon. Friend’s concerns and will make two points to him. First, we intend to move ahead quickly with setting up the independent noise monitoring body, which is needed to make sure the rules are kept to. In addition, I believe the modernisation of air space, and proper enforcement of the way air space operates, will mean we can use it in a smarter way, give communities more relief and avoid the kind of change that affected my right hon. Friend’s constituency. I give him the assurance that I will work with him, and make sure that NATS and others work with him, to ensure that the issue he is concerned about is addressed in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will make a little more progress, and then take some further interventions.

The need for an additional runway in the south-east is greater than ever before because—this is the reason why we have to do this—all five of London’s main airports will be full by the mid-2030s, and Heathrow is full today. We are seeing business leave the UK and go to airports like Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Paris, which have made additional capacity provision. If we sit here with our “Plane Finder” app on, we can watch planes flying overhead from the United Kingdom so that UK business passengers can go to Schiphol and then fly around the world. We are losing those connections to other countries, and we are losing the investment that goes around those connections. That is an important part of why this expansion is necessary.

I also need to be clear that this is not at the expense of growth at our other airports. It is simply not the case that other airports will lose business as a result of the expansion. All of our forecasts show every airport around the UK continuing to grow and expand. The UK’s Regional and Business Airports Group, which represents 40 airports, wrote to hon. Members saying: “Heathrow expansion would mean more UK airports have vital access to a truly unrivalled network of routes...to destinations around the world.”

With expansion at Heathrow, non-London airports will continue to experience that strong growth—80% by 2050—and, importantly, they will have the capacity to accommodate that growth.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. This is clearly more than just about the constituencies around Heathrow and London; it is about connectivity for all the regions, as he has outlined. It has been said that Belfast City, Belfast International and Londonderry airports will gain by some 15% in new domestic routes. Can the Minister confirm that the increase will be of 15%?

Chris Grayling: My expectation is that we will see substantial growth. I would not put an exact percentage on it, but I have said that I will use the public service obligation mechanisms to set aside 15% of the additional capacity at Heathrow for links around the United Kingdom. We will use the PSO mechanisms to ensure that airports such as those in Northern Ireland, which are already thoroughly successful, benefit from this connection, and we will do the same in Scotland, the south-west and at other airports in the north and potentially north Wales, where this can make a difference.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): How many airports per region will be protected by that “up to 15%” promise in the document? I have been led to understand that the Department will only protect one per region.
Chris Grayling: That is simply not the case. Heathrow itself has set out a long list of airports that it expects to benefit and where it will make provision for those links to happen. I believe that setting aside that 15% will result in links being provided to airports all around the United Kingdom. We will use the PSO mechanism to make sure that the expansion delivers improved links to all around the United Kingdom.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): This proposal for a third runway at Heathrow was first published in 2002, whereas Hong Kong published theirs in 2011 and it will be built within five years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to remain internationally competitive, we should get on and build the runway?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely; I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We have delayed on this for much too long, and it is time we got on with the job.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Aviation already has a uniquely generous allocation for climate emissions, which basically means that passenger numbers can grow by up to 60% by 2050, but according to the Secretary of State’s own Department, passenger numbers are expected to grow by 93% by 2050 even before expansion at Heathrow, so when is he going to start looking at demand-side regulation—perhaps including a frequent flyer levy—rather than simply carrying on growing more and more supply? Or is he content to follow the advice of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and basically cover the whole country in concrete?

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would have expected better from the hon. Lady. She claims that I have said that I want to cover the whole of the country in concrete. Not only is that deliberately untrue but I think she should withdraw that falsehood.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady has made her point, and the hon. Lady—I mean the hon. Gentleman—[Laughter.] I will start again. The hon. Lady has made her point. The hon. Gentleman has made his point, which is not a point of order for me, but the matter is dealt with, I think.

Chris Grayling: Let me touch on the issue of climate change, which I was planning to come to in a moment. We are confident that we can deliver the expansion at Heathrow within our obligations under the Climate Change Act 2008. Any increase in emissions that would have a material impact on our ability to meet our obligations would lead to a refusal. I can tell the hon. Lady that the independent Committee on Climate Change wrote to me two weeks ago setting out its views on the NPS. It works to a target that aviation emissions in 2050 should be no higher than they were in 2005. With more efficient aircraft and engines, improved ground operations and the use of biofuels, the CCC’s analysis estimates that the UK can accommodate that increase in air travel by 2050 while meeting our climate change obligations. We believe that an expanded Heathrow airport and a new runway are consistent with this target.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I want to make some more progress, then I will give way a couple more times.

Let me touch on the benefits to the wider economy and the connections to Heathrow airport on the ground. Surface access is one of the questions that is regularly raised. People ask why this location is best and what the benefits will be for the United Kingdom. Heathrow is already Britain’s best-connected airport by road and rail, and this will be further strengthened by improvements to the Piccadilly line, by new links to Heathrow through Crossrail and connections to HS2 via an interchange at Old Oak Common, and beyond that by the development of western and southern rail access to Heathrow.

A point that people often miss about Heathrow airport is that it is also crucial to the economy because it is our biggest freight port by value. It carries more freight by value than all other UK airports combined, nearly all of it transported in the belly-hold of passenger aircraft. This expansion will bring a real trade boost to the United Kingdom, providing a greater choice and frequency of vital long-haul flights to international markets for passengers and goods than could be achieved by any of the other options that were available to us. These benefits will be felt all around the United Kingdom.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows about the case of my constituent, John Coles, a British Airways engineer who sadly passed away in an accident at Heathrow. I support a third runway, but the Secretary of State has not yet mentioned health and safety. Will he ensure that the health and safety of the 75,000 employees and 78 million passengers will be front and centre in his mind?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. What happened to my hon. Friend’s constituent was tragic. I know that it is an accident that all at Heathrow bitterly regret, and they have worked to learn lessons from it. Of course, at a major facility such as Heathrow—and, indeed, any other airport—safety has to be our priority. Aviation is one of the safest—if not the safest—modes of transport around, but that should not in any way allow for slippage on health and safety.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Manchester airport employs thousands of people in my constituency, and it has 28 million passengers a year, with a capacity of 55 million. Obviously, it is doing a lot more than hub; it has global connections as well. Given the investment in northern powerhouse rail and in the north-western and northern economy, can my right hon. Friend assure me and my constituents that we will have even more benefits from this new proposal?

Chris Grayling: All the expectations we have are that Manchester airport will continue to grow strongly. There has been a £1 billion investment, and I was there recently to see the start of the development of the new terminal building. Manchester airport is a fantastic success story. It is a real asset to the economy and to the country as a whole. Manchester will also gain through the additional connectivity to new and emerging markets that we get through a hub airport. This is a good news story for Manchester, and it is also part of the ongoing success story of the north.
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State’s Department made of the impact of this proposal on the respiratory health of London children?

Chris Grayling: We have been very clear about two things. First, this runway cannot open if it does not meet air quality standards. Secondly, the air quality issue in west London is much bigger than the airport itself. This is the kind of challenge that we see in any busy metropolitan area. That is why we published our air quality strategy last summer, and it is why we need to get on with the job of making our car fleets much greener through lowering emissions. We are pushing ahead with low emission vehicles as fast as we can in this country.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Heathrow is a vital economic hub, but because of that, the traffic congestion that surrounds it is a really serious problem, particularly in parts of my constituency, where the emissions levels are high and the roads are almost impassable. Can he give me an assurance that, in looking at the development of a third runway, attention will be given to improving the infrastructure so that these areas benefit?

Chris Grayling: That has to happen. This is not just about infrastructure. My Department has already been in discussions with South Bucks Council about some of the issues that my right hon. and learned Friend’s area will face and about how they can be mitigated. One of the options is to improve the environment around the Colne Valley, and I am keen for my officials to work with him and the local authority on that. The provision of a community fund from Heathrow as a result of this will make it easier to fund projects such as those.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that Manchester airport will gain from this proposal, but the reality is that the modelling that his own Department and the Transport Select Committee have done shows that Manchester airport will have 11% or 12% fewer international flights by 2030 as a result of the Heathrow expansion. I spoke to the chief executive of Manchester airport today, and he explained to me that its catchment area for passengers is very different, so it is simply wrong to say to the House that Manchester will somehow benefit from this proposal.

Chris Grayling: I refer my right hon. Friend to the tables that we have published, which show that Manchester will grow international routes over the 2030s and 2040s, as will Heathrow. This is an important part of delivering growth around the United Kingdom. The reason for a hub airport is that, if there is a new destination such as an emerging city in China or a new, growing economy in Africa or Latin America, there is often simply not enough of a market from an individual location to support that new route. A hub brings together passengers enough of a market from an individual location to make that route viable.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am pre-empting some of the remarks that I will make in my speech later, but as a Manchester MP, I thought I should speak for Manchester airport on that point. Manchester airport refutes the figures in the forecasts, because it believes that it will exceed those passenger numbers even before the Heathrow expansion is on stream. The hub argument is not the right argument to make for Manchester, because most of its connectivity involves direct flights. There are other reasons that Greater Manchester MPs have come together to support this proposal, but that particular argument is not the one to make.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am not going to stop interventions being made, but they must be short if we are to get through all the speakers.

Chris Grayling: We want to ensure that passengers who are flying to a hub airport from points in the UK can do so through a UK airport and not, for example, through a middle eastern hub. Manchester airport is a great success story and, on behalf of this country, I am hugely proud of how much it has achieved. I have been trying to work with the management of Manchester airport to help it to win business internationally, because I think it has a great model that it could take to other countries. I think that this will be a win-win. It will be a win-win for the north of England, for Manchester, for Liverpool, for Leeds, for Newcastle, for Edinburgh, for Glasgow, for Aberdeen, for Dundee, for Belfast and for Newquay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way three more times, then I really must make some progress.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend’s remarks about climate change, which will clearly require an upgrade to surface transport. Will he confirm whether the statement lays out the polluter pays principle and that the developer will be expected to pay a contribution to the surface transport upgrades?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Improvements to nearby roads and paying for parts of the rail projects that are due to happen are built into the plans. It is absolutely essential that that is the case. Heathrow airport will make a substantial contribution to that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way to two more Members who have a particular interest in the issue.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The last time this House took a decision on this matter, in January 2009, the Secretary of State voted against a third runway. Since then the case for Heathrow has got worse on every indicator, whether it is the economic case, the cost to the public purse, the environmental case or the effect on the regions. Why has he changed his mind in the face of all that evidence?

Chris Grayling: We commissioned an independent review that asked where we should site new capacity in the south-east of England. The Airports Commission came back with a very clear view. We have studied that view and talked to all those who are promoting individual schemes, and as a Government we believe that this is the
right thing to do. We stood on this in our election manifesto last year. I believe it is the right thing to do for Britain.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The Secretary of State said earlier that not a single regional airport has opposed this scheme, but will he not acknowledge that Manchester, Edinburgh, Birmingham and the East Midlands have all expressed opposition to it, not because they do not believe that they will see growth, but because they believe that whatever growth they do see will be in spite of Heathrow expansion and that it will be less?

Chris Grayling: The key point is that they will see growth. The opportunities are there right across the United Kingdom. As I said a moment ago, the body that represents regional airports has been very robust indeed in its support. I genuinely believe that this project brings benefits right across the United Kingdom, including at least 100 additional flights a week for Scotland, and potential new routes for Northern Ireland, unlocking the benefits of tourism and advanced manufacturing. We believe that this will deliver, across the United Kingdom, the kinds of connections we need for the future.

Let me touch briefly on a couple of other issues that have been raised. First, I have been very clear that this airport NPS says that expansion can happen only if the delivery is compliant with our legal obligations on air quality. I am very confident that the measures and requirements set out in the NPS provide a very strong basis for meeting those obligations, including a substantial increase in public transport mode share, and it could also include an emissions-based access charge to Heathrow airport and the use of zero or low-emission vehicles. Heathrow is already consulting on the potential of a clean air zone.

Crucially, communities will be supported by a package of compensation worth up to £2.6 billion. That is absolutely vital. It is not possible to deliver a project such as this without some consequences for people who live in the area—I am well aware of that. Our job is to make it as easy as possible for those people in what is inevitably going to be a very difficult set of circumstances. There is, therefore, a world-leading package of compensation, ensuring that homeowners who lose their homes or who live closest to an expanded airport will be paid 125% of the full market value of their property. It includes a comprehensive noise insulation programme for homes and schools, and a community compensation fund of up to £50 million a year, which can help in places such as the Colne Valley. The Government will also consider how local authorities can benefit from a retention scheme for the additional business rates paid by an expanded Heathrow.

To mitigate the noise impacts of expansion, the proposed NPS makes it clear that the Government intend to implement a six-and-a-half-hour ban on scheduled night flights, which could mean that some communities will receive up to eight hours of noise relief at night. That is a really important part of the proposal. It may be uncomfortable and difficult for airlines, but it is the right thing for local communities.

It is important to note that those measures will not be optional; they will be legally binding. Let me explain how we will ensure that that happens. We are governed by the Planning Act 2008, a good piece of legislation passed by the Labour party. Following a period of statutory consultation by a promoter, any subsequent application for a development consent order will be allocated to the Planning Inspectorate. At the end of the examination process, the inspectorate will report to the Secretary of State and the mitigation measures needed to comply with the NPS will be imposed on a successful applicant as requirements in the development consent order. The Act grants the relevant planning authority significant powers to investigate a breach of the requirements and ultimately to apply for an injunction or prosecute for failure to remedy a breach. In the Crown court the fine is unlimited and, in determining the level of the fine, recent judicial trends have tended to look to the benefit gained from the offence.

I can also confirm that expansion can and will be privately financed, at no cost to the taxpayer. It has to be delivered in the interest of the consumer, which is why in 2016 I set out my ambition to keep airport charges as close as possible to current levels, and why I have commissioned the Civil Aviation Authority to work with the airport to keep landing charges close to current levels. So far, that process has identified cost savings of £2.5 billion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: Before I conclude, I will take a couple more interventions, but only from Members who have not already intervened, for obvious reasons.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I take the Secretary of State back to the issue of climate change, which he glossed over? His policy statement says that passenger numbers can grow by 80% by 2050 and we can still meet our carbon budgets, but the Committee on Climate Change says that they must not grow by more than 60% by 2050. He has outlined a set of measures in his sustainability appraisal, but is he not just adopting the Mica wber strategy of hoping that something is going to turn up on climate change?

Chris Grayling: The key thing that is happening right now on climate change and aviation emissions is a transformation of aviation technology. As I said earlier, the new generation of aircraft are already much more fuel efficient. We expect the introduction of biofuels and further technological changes. We have been not only working very carefully with the Airports Commission, but listening very carefully to the Committee on Climate Change. This House will form a view today, but we believe absolutely that we can deliver this expansion within our obligations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way one final time and then conclude.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In the past, Heathrow has scored poorly on accessibility for people with disabilities. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that, as part of this expansion, Heathrow improves its accessibility for people with disabilities, particularly people with wheelchairs?

Chris Grayling: That is a really important point. It is not something that can and should wait until 2026. There have been one or two unfortunate incidents recently
in the aviation sector, which should be as disability friendly as any other mode of transport. All airports and airlines have a duty to do that.

I am going to conclude because there is a long list of Members who want to speak. My message to the House is very simple: I believe that this project is in the strategic interests of our nation and that it will unlock prosperity in all the regions of this country. I think it will set us fair for the post-Brexit world. I believe this is essential for all our constituents, with the jobs it will create and the connections it will bring. We have to deliver it in a way that ultimately stretches every sinew to do the best we possibly can for the communities affected. My commitment to them is that we will do that. We will ensure tight rules around the permissions that are granted, and we will make sure that the commitments made by the airport and by this Government in the run-up to today’s vote are kept, enshrined in law and delivered for the future.

Ultimately, this is a project this country needs. It has been delayed for much too long. It falls to this House of Commons to take a decision today and I urge it to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call Andy McDonald, I warn Members that we will start with an eight-minute limit but it will soon drop to five minutes.

6.18 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Airport expansion in the south-east of England has been a deeply contentious and divisive issue for 50 years. If the motion is agreed to, it will generate many winners, not least the shareholders of Heathrow Airport Ltd, but it risks making losers of many, including the communities in which thousands of people will lose hundreds of homes. I regret to say that the Government have not been direct and clear with those communities and, as I will point out, the Government are demanding that they make sacrifices based on flawed information. Their potential loss should not be ignored or devalued.

I respect voices in industry and the significant voices in the trade union movement who have concluded that loss should not be ignored or devalued.

My predecessor was responsible for writing the tests, and it is my job to implement them—my predecessor has a new career.

I remind the House that the UK’s aviation and aerospace industries are world leaders. They bring services to hundreds of millions of passengers, generate tens of billions of pounds in economic benefits and support nearly 1 million jobs. Labour wants successful and growing aviation and aerospace industries across the UK. The industries and their workforces deserve a sustainable and strategic plan for the future, and they currently have neither.

Mr Speaker,

“I hope that the Secretary of State recognises that as a result of today’s announcement, nobody will take this Government seriously on the environment again.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 366.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the current Prime Minister during a 2009 debate in which she opposed the expansion of Heathrow. Nearly 10 years on, I entirely agree with her. Given how she and her Transport Secretary have approached this issue, nobody should take this Government seriously on the environment.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the glaring absence of any genuine carbon mitigation policy framework, tonight’s votes will break down into two camps of those who believe we can negotiate with climate physics, and those who do not?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which I hope shortly to be able to address in some detail.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I must confess that I am a waverer on Heathrow expansion. I do not like the air quality dangers we face or the Government’s target to do something about air quality by 2040, by which time 1 million people will have died. People in the north of England, in Yorkshire and in Huddersfield want to know what investment they will get. This is yet another massive investment in London and the south-east.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend raises two significant points about air quality and investment across the United Kingdom. I hope to address them in great detail as I proceed with my speech.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andy McDonald: I will make some progress, because I am aware that many Members want to speak.

This has not been a great year so far for the British transport system, with meltdown on the railways and growing frustration across the transport industry about the Government’s approach to Brexit. Last week’s news from Airbus struck like a thunderbolt, so the proposal to undertake a large-scale infrastructure project in the UK should be a good news story. The expansion of our hub airport should be very good news indeed—except it is not.

The Government have not done the work to support the development of this project. Their case is riddled with gaps and is fundamentally flawed. Yet again, this Secretary of State has made a complete shambles of a vital national project. Yet again, he is not putting the
reliable facts before Parliament. Today’s vote has been scheduled just days before the Government’s own advisory body, the Committee on Climate Change, is due to publish a report that is expected to warn that increasing aviation emissions will destroy Britain’s greenhouse gas targets. It appears that the vote on the national policy statement has been planned for today so that hon. and right hon. Members are left in the dark about how much the Secretary of State’s plan will obliterate the UK’s climate change commitments. That is not only reckless, but shows contempt for Parliament and for the environment.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Is not my hon. Friend slightly missing the point? Aviation—across the world and into Europe—will continue and grow, so the real question is whether it will be going into Schiphol, Frankfurt or Charles de Gaulle airports, or whether we will create investment, protect the well-paid, unionised jobs at Heathrow, and create opportunities for the youngsters of the future.

Andy McDonald: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention but, of course, we must always ensure that any growth is delivered sustainably—that has to be the point.

Hon. Members will not have the opportunity to see the hugely important Committee on Climate Change report before they vote. Global warming is the single most important issue facing the world, yet Members of this House are being asked to vote today without full knowledge and without the full set of facts.

That is outrageous behaviour from the Government, and from the Secretary of State in particular. The Justice Committee said last week that his multi-billion pound reforms to the probation service in 2014 will never work. In his two years as Secretary of State for Transport, he has laid waste to the railways, slashing and burning and leaving a trail of scorched earth. Rail electrification cuts, franchising meltdown and timetabling chaos have caused misery to millions. His mismanaging of airport expansion, as he has mismanaged other areas of transport, will present much bigger risks, with immensely more serious consequences.

The Transport Secretary has consistently demonstrated poor judgment and a reliance on incomplete, unreliable and non-existent evidence, yet he stands here today and expects the House to take his word for it—to take a leap of faith with him. Labour has been clear that we will support airport expansion only if the very specific provisions of our four tests are met. We are not against expansion; we are against this option for expansion, as presented.

The north-west runway is too risky and it may be illegal. There are simply too many holes in the case. There are too many hostages to fortune for the taxpayer and for any future Government.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: I will give way, and I will then make progress.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State. He says that climate and the expectation of meeting our climate responsibilities are vital, but does he accept that Professor Dame Julia King, who is a member of the Committee on Climate Change, sat on the Davies commission and fully endorsed its report?

Andy McDonald: The critical word is that it “could.” That is the important point—not that it will, but that it is quite possible that it could. There is an awful lot of work to get from one place to the other.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out a powerful case regarding the four tests. The Secretary of State said that one of the key selling points is connectivity with our regional airports, but that will be only up to 15% of the new capacity. He has already indicated there will be 100 extra flights a day from Scotland, and as that 15% of new capacity is for all the regional airports and the Crown dependencies, it does not sound like a very good deal to me.

Andy McDonald: There are grave misgivings on the whole issue of regional connectivity, which I will address, but first I will deal with the tests.

Can the airport actually be built? It is not clear that it can. Heathrow’s borrowing costs depend on whether it can increase landing charges at what is already the most expensive airport in the world. The Government have provided no guarantees that landing charges will be held flat. Astonishingly, there are no details or costings on the upgrades to the M25 and the wider transport system in London and around the airport that are required for expansion. That uncertainty risks yet more transport infrastructure investment being sucked into the south-east of England at the expense of the rest of the country. It is simply staggering that this information has not been provided.

The cost-recovery clause that the Government signed with Heathrow, as highlighted by the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), is an enormous liability for future Governments and represents a significant risk to taxpayers. For those reasons, Labour has concluded that the third runway is not in fact deliverable.

Ensuring the health and safety of our country for our children and grandchildren should be the most important priority for each and every Member of this House. Some 40,000 people die prematurely each year because of poor air quality. Despite the superficial public relations initiatives from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, this Government have dithered and delayed on dealing with air quality and carbon emissions.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying. He makes a good case for why he will not be able to support Heathrow, but what would his alternative be, given that growth in the sector will happen whether we have Heathrow or not? We will simply be handing business to other airports.

Andy McDonald: We should consider which airports they may be, because—

Michael Fabricant: Frankfurt, Amsterdam—

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is listing names from overseas, but how about others—Birmingham, Newcastle, Manchester?
On test 2, we are being asked today to support a significant expansion in UK aviation capacity without a plan from the Government for tackling aviation carbon emissions. The Secretary of State did not even mention climate change in his statement to the House on 5 June.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con) rose—

Andy McDonald: I am going to plough on, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. Plenty of people want to speak. I know he has just walked into the Chamber, but I want to crack on.

The Government have still not set out aviation’s place in the overall strategy for UK emissions reduction, despite their having a legal requirement to do so. According to the Department for Transport’s own projections, this plan for Heathrow expansion will cause the Government to miss their carbon emission limits. The Government argue that they can reduce emissions through technology, but their only proposal is a hypothetical case study by a consultant that contains a disclaimer professing that there is “significant uncertainty around the results of the study and the conclusions that are drawn”.

That is not a credible position.

Mary Creagh: The economic case for Heathrow is unarguable, but the environmental case is unconscionable. The Department’s analysis—this is from the study my hon. Friend talks about—refers to two ways to reduce carbon emissions from flights: one is single-engine taxiing; the other is ensuring that 12% of fuels in aeroplanes are renewable. Neither of those is currently in operation in Heathrow or any other airport in the world.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point because this whole process is predicated on banking technological achievements that do not currently exist. We must be more thoughtful about this.

The Committee on Climate Change’s last progress report saw the UK failing to stay on track to meet its 2030 carbon targets. The CCC publishes its latest report on Thursday, and it reportedly will detail just how badly the Government are performing. The third runway will increase the number of flights by 50%, as per the Airports Commission report—table 12.1; page 238—yet any increase in aviation emissions will require other sectors to reduce their emissions beyond 85%. That is astonishingly imbalanced. The Department’s own projections show that a new runway at Heathrow will directly lead to a breach of at least 3.3 million tonnes of the 37.5 million tonnes carbon dioxide limit for 2050 set by the CCC without new policies to mitigate emissions.

Chris Grayling: It might be helpful if the House were to understand whether the hon. Gentleman’s position is that there should be no expansion of aviation at all.

Andy McDonald: I thought the right hon. Gentleman was going to provide some clarity from the Dispatch Box about the breach of the CO₂ limits that I have just described, but instead he asks that question. In fact, we know that we are talking about considerably more than that. It is utterly absurd for the Government to ask the House to vote on expanding Heathrow without a plan for reducing aviation carbon emissions. Under the revised NPS, there is a very real risk that aviation’s carbon emissions will be higher in 2050. Furthermore, the Department for Transport is not due to publish a new aviation strategy until 2019.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is right that the environmental case against Heathrow expansion has always been unarguable; what has changed is that the economic case is also now very strongly against it. The net present value is plus or minus £2 billion to £3 billion over time. The case for Gatwick, which would be much easier to build and would involve far less grief, is much easier than that, so whether on economic or environmental grounds, Heathrow is a non-starter.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He makes a powerful point, which many commentators have identified, about the various economic arguments.

Kwasi Kwarteng rose—

Andy McDonald: I will not take any further interventions; it was well timed, but too late.

This Parliament will not know the Government’s plan for keeping UK aviation emissions at or below 2005 levels by 2050 until next year—talk about carts and horses! This scenario, where aviation targets are exceeded, would place an unreasonably large burden on other UK industries. I do not believe it is acceptable or fair to ask other sectors of the economy to make reductions to compensate for aviation emissions. The UK Government call themselves a climate leader, but only last week the EU raised its carbon reduction target to 45% by 2030, which is above that set by the Paris agreement, whereas this week the UK Government support an aviation plan that will increase emissions without a clear plan to reduce them. The revised NPS is simply not consistent with the obligations set out in the Climate Change Act 2008. We are being asked to give the Transport Secretary a blank cheque on the environment. On the issue of climate change, this fails to meet test 2.

Airspace modernisation is vital to the future of this country. Only through modernisation can we improve the structure and management of UK airspace, to handle growth and realise the economic benefits. The process and consultation to make these changes is at an early stage and there are many years ahead, yet airspace modernisation is critical to noise levels at an expanded Heathrow. Once again, we are being asked to accept promises on noise without a broad framework for the future. That is not good enough and this is yet another gaping hole in the Government’s case.

It is difficult to clearly assess the noise impact at Heathrow until the airspace modernisation programme is more advanced. Precise details of new flight paths will not be known for several years, and this represents another significant uncertainty. The Transport Committee’s excellent report called on the Government to set clear noise targets, but in the revised NPS they are not proposing any new targets. Do they really care about noise levels?

The revised NPS states that “the Secretary of State will consider air quality impacts over the wider area likely to be affected, as well as in the vicinity of the scheme. In order to grant development consent, the Secretary of
State will need to be satisfied that, with mitigation, the scheme would be compliant with legal obligations that provide for the protection of human health and the environment.”

That provides no indication as to how the air pollution can be managed. Much of the additional air pollution is largely outside Heathrow’s control. The Government have been repeatedly dragged through the courts over their failure to address the air pollution crisis, so it would be generous to assume that they will now suddenly address these issues in the context of a decision over an expanded Heathrow. That the key issue of tackling air pollution could turn on the judgment of the Transport Secretary does nothing to afford us any comfort whatsoever.

What of the regional economic benefits? The revised NPS says that if the third runway is built, up to 15% of all new routes will need to be reserved for the domestic market. There are considerable uncertainties around that pledge. The Government say that public service obligations will ensure compliance, but “up to 15%” could mean as little as 1%, and PSOs apply to cities rather than airport-specific locations. Late last week, the Government announced they would use PSOs to ensure domestic connectivity. They have not said where they will be used, how many will be used, what percentage of routes will be guaranteed through this method or if they will be permanent. In addition, PSOs would make domestic routes exempt from air passenger duty. That tax cut was not considered in the business case, and the Government have not stated its cost to the public purse. I know that they will make a lot of important points. I greatly enjoyed my seven years in the Government. I spent four years in the Government Whips Office, keeping the show on the road during those difficult coalition years; I carried out the 2015 spending review—controversial in places—which is now bearing fruit as we see the deficit at a record low; and I was at the very foundation of the Department for International Trade to help the Secretary of State for International Trade to make the crucial preparations for having our own independent trade policy for the first time in 45 years. But I am also surprised to be resigning from the Government as I had always been led to believe that the decision on this issue would be a free vote.

I always knew, however, that I would vote against this proposal. At the 2017 general election I made two unequivocal pledges:

“Greg will be voting against the proposal when it comes before Parliament, expected later this year”;

and:

“Greg is against Heathrow’s 3rd runway and will vote against it, in Parliament.”

So for me, this is not just a debate about Heathrow, important though that is; it is also about being true to one’s word and to one’s election pledges.

Regrettably, this is a truncated debate, but I am joined by several right hon. and hon. Members who have similar views about Heathrow, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and my hon. Friends the Members for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), and I know that they will make a lot of important points. I have three points to make, briefly. The first is about the impact on the environment in an urban London context; the second is about whether a large hub airport is in the nation’s interests, and the arguments about London’s connectivity; and the third is on night flights and the need to remove this wholly unnecessary stain on the liveability of our great capital city.

On London’s precious urban environment, Heathrow already exceeds legal pollution limits, before any single plane has landed at the third runway. Heathrow is seeking to have an extra 28 million passengers visit the airport each year, but somehow without a single extra
car journey. Furthermore, Heathrow has not yet identified the future flight paths, so it is impossible to tell who and where will be affected by this big increase in flights. An awful lot of Londoners currently have no idea that they will be overflown by planes every 90 seconds.

Zac Goldsmith: I salute my right hon. Friend’s principles on this issue. Does he agree that the lack of information on where the new flight paths will go makes an absolute mockery of all the consultations that have been doing the rounds over the past couple of years?

Greg Hands: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. It is perfectly possible to show where the flight paths are going to be or are likely to be. I conducted my own consultation, because both Heathrow and the Department for Transport initially refused to do a consultation in my Chelsea and Fulham constituency. I eventually had them come to the constituency, but even then they were unwilling to provide such basic information.

The pledge to build a freight hub is absolute madness when we already have excellent freight hubs that are well away from population centres, such as those at East Midlands airport and Stansted. Surely freight hubs should be created away from population centres, not in the middle of urban environments. The Secretary of State’s argument centres on this essential proposition: that the UK needs a hub airport—and by implication itself. Birmingham airport could take 17 million extra flights now on the existing infrastructure, and that capacity could be unlocked if we built the high-speed loop that was originally proposed. The cost of that loop would be about half that proposed for the new runway at Heathrow. Should we not look again at using high-speed rail to unlock capacity we already have rather than bring forward a proposal that will drain 43,000 flights from our airport?

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I respect the position in which the right hon. Gentleman finds himself. Birmingham airport could take 17 million extra flights now on the existing infrastructure, and that capacity could be unlocked if we built the high-speed loop that was originally proposed. The cost of that loop would be about half that proposed for the new runway at Heathrow. Should we not look again at using high-speed rail to unlock capacity we already have rather than bring forward a proposal that will drain 43,000 flights from our airport?

Greg Hands: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I support high-speed rail. With regard to the sort of solutions that one could come up with, I certainly think that that is probably an example of the sort of thing that could increase the UK’s connectivity as a whole.

On night flights, the situation is untenable. There are allowed to be up to 16 flights each night, starting from 4.30 am. I hear these planes at 4.30. I frequently receive letters about them from my constituents. One can almost time the first flight coming over at 4.30. This is done in the interests of a few thousand people. These are important people travelling from the far east to this country to do business; nevertheless, we are talking about a few thousand people who have been consulted against the convenience of many hundreds of thousands of people living directly under those flight paths, many of whom are some of the most economically productive people in this country, paying a lot of tax. We should not ignore their interests. We need to ban night flights—6 am is early enough. Even if this proposal is to be adopted, the minimum quid pro quo should be the abolition of all arrivals before 6 am. We definitely do not want this stealthy smoothing.

I have just outlined a few of the arguments against this policy statement. The proposal is fundamentally flawed, but this vote is also about integrity and about
the pledges that we make to our electors. It is to be regretted that we will not now have a free vote, but I urge colleagues to vote against the proposal tonight.

6.52 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am a civil engineer by profession and so have an appreciation of the importance of infrastructure investment. For too long, successive UK Governments have not invested enough money directly into infrastructure. The correct infrastructure projects can lead to increased productivity, increased connectivity, a possible increase in visitors, a possible increase in trade and contributions to growth in the economy. Clearly, those are all the hoped-for benefits of the additional runway proposed for Heathrow.

When it comes to decision making on infrastructure, Governments are often too frightened to make decisions because of potential impacts and disruption. Heathrow has been a case in point: the expansion and additional runway have been spoken about for decades. It is only right that the pros and cons are assessed, and this must be done with a balanced perspective. The Airports Commission recommends the additional runway at Heathrow, and the National Infrastructure Commission has said that it wants it to proceed. The Scottish Government have spoken in support of it in principle, and I have spoken in favour of it, although I have highlighted some concerns.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He mentions the support of the Scottish Government. Until 24 hours ago, the SNP Scottish Government said that they supported expansion at Heathrow airport and looked forward to Scotland seeing the benefits. What has changed in the past 24 hours?

Alan Brown: Sometimes when we take an intervention, we worry about what is going to come and trip us up. That was so obvious that I did not see it coming. If the hon. Gentleman waits and is willing to listen to the rest of my speech, I will set out where I am going.

After forensic analysis, the Transport Committee recommended approval of the national policy statement, but with a considerable number of recommendations for consideration. The proposed expansion at Heathrow has the support, on record, of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, plus Inverness, Ayrshire, Glasgow, and Edinburgh chambers of commerce. Clearly, it has the backing of the GMB and Unite the Union. As the Transport Secretary said, it has the support of the Regional and Business Airports Group; it has the explicit support of Glasgow, Highlands and Islands and Aberdeen airports; and it has the support of Airlines UK.

As we will hear over the course of tonight, there are concerns about the proposals. Some environmentalists will never support air expansion of any kind. Clearly, there are local objections to do with the impact and disruption; I appreciate that MPs should represent the concerns of their constituents and I can understand why some are against the proposal.

However, given the general support that I have outlined, the Secretary of State should be able to pull this off, and for me this is where he has come up short. He has come up short on addressing the concerns of the Transport Committee, but where he has really come up short is on the protection of slots for domestic flights. My predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), previously raised the issue of protection of slots and the need for point-to-point public service obligations. The Transport Committee highlighted the fact that further clarity was required on national slots in paragraph 3.34 of the national policy statement. This is where the UK Government are, frankly, all over the place. Paragraph 3.34 states:

“The Government recognises that air routes are in the first instance a commercial decision for airlines and are not in the gift of the airport operator.”

The Government then state that they will hold Heathrow airport to account. That is clearly a contradiction: they are saying that it is the airlines that hold the slots, but that they will hold Heathrow airport to account.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I do not understand what difference it makes where the flights are going to. If we want trade and business with the rest of the world, why does that matter? We want that business—why does not the hon. Gentleman?

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Frankly, as a Scottish MP and an SNP spokesperson on transport, it matters greatly to me where the flights are going. I want these flights, the connectivity for Scotland and the protection that we have not yet heard about from the UK Government.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech. I have a simple question. Does he want the extra 100 flights that an expanded Heathrow will provide for Scotland? Can he give me a simple yes or no?

Alan Brown: I want that, but I also want guarantees of protection. I will come on to that point, so, again, I ask the hon. Gentleman to show a bit of patience and wait.

Chris Grayling: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Can he confirm whether Heathrow airport has this afternoon agreed with the SNP and the Scottish Government that it is prepared to set aside 200, not 100, slots at Heathrow airport for connections to Scotland? If that is the case, why are they continuing to object to Heathrow’s plans?

Alan Brown: Obviously, 200 slots are preferable to 100 slots. The thing is that only the UK Government can provide the protections. Heathrow has always said that it is willing to work with the Scottish Government, and with the UK Government, but it is only the UK Government who have the powers to provide the guarantees and protection.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some very important points; what he raises here is a real issue. Let us put this into context. One hundred flights means 50 arrivals a week—seven flights a day. We are talking about Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Prestwick and Inverness. It is simply not enough. Is it not the case that Prestwick has held out its hand to the Scottish Government, but it is the UK Government who have not stood up to protect Scotland’s interests? That is the point.
Alan Brown: I will elaborate on my right hon. Friend’s point later in my speech.

The Government have still not responded properly to recommendation 10 from the Select Committee on Transport, regarding the 15% of new slots for domestic connections. They have fallen short on clarity. Paragraph 1.60 of the Government’s response to the recommendations states:

“The Government expects the majority of these domestic routes from a potentially expanded Heathrow to be commercially viable”.

Expecting the majority of routes to be commercially viable falls a long way short of cast-iron guarantees that the UK Government are going to protect those slots. There is a concession that “the Government will take action where appropriate to secure routes through the use of Public Service Obligations (PSOs)”,

but, crucially, the Government do not explain how these will be managed. We are advised in paragraph 1.61 that:

“The Government’s expectations on domestic connectivity will be detailed as part of the Aviation Strategy Green Paper”,

which is not expected until the second half of 2018. Having to wait months after tonight’s binding vote in order to get clarity on these points is simply not good enough.

Ian Paisley: As someone who represents one of the regions of the United Kingdom, I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants certainty and clarity about this issue. But does he accept that an expansion, by its very nature, will necessitate more domestic passengers and, hence, more routes will open up locally?

Alan Brown: That is not the case. It all comes back to the protection of slots. Airlines operate the slots. If no protections are put in place, the whole concern is that domestic slots will be lost to more lucrative international flights. That is why I am asking for this protection. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman, who represents airports in Northern Ireland, would be grateful that I am looking for this guarantee from the Government.

Ian Paisley: But by necessity more passengers will be required to travel through Heathrow. Those passengers are going to come from Northern Ireland, Scotland and the north of England. That is a fact. Some 700,000 passengers annually already travel from Northern Ireland. That number will expand, and it will also expand for Scotland.

Alan Brown: But that is not guaranteed, which is why we need these protections.

Over the years, domestic connectivity and the number of domestic slots have been cut massively because of the way in which the airlines have operated the existing slots. If we are going to get these increases, we need protections in place.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman, speaking up for Scotland as he does. But does he not agree that whether there are 100 or 200 extra flights a week—whatever the figure is—an expanded Heathrow would provide more flights than Scotland currently gets?

Alan Brown: It comes back to the anticipation that 15% of new slots will be available for domestic connectivity. Quite frankly, every regional airport wants a cut of that action. The hon. Gentleman’s local airport, Northern Ireland, Scotland and airports in the north-east of England all want some of that 15%. At the moment, we do not know how that 15% is going to be broken down, or what is going to be provided.

Justine Greening: The Transport Committee’s analysis showed that Scotland will actually lose 2,700 international flights per annum as a result of Heathrow expansion, and that flights will be fewer than they otherwise would have been.

Alan Brown: I do not recognise the exact figure mentioned by the right hon. Lady, but I do accept that Department for Transport figures suggest that direct connections and international connectivity will not increase as much if the Heathrow expansion goes ahead. Yet Scottish airports themselves do not express that concern and they do back the expansion of Heathrow, so I also have to trust their judgment on the matter.

Chris Grayling: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Scottish National party’s view is that because it is not sure how big Scotland’s bit of the cake is going to be, there should be no cake?

Alan Brown: I have also spoken up for other regional airports, because I would expect them to want the same protections that I am asking for when it comes to Scottish airports. It is up to the Secretary of State to give these guarantees and satisfy us on these points.

Paragraph 1.62 of the Government’s response to the Transport Committee’s recommendations explains that the Crown dependencies are also included in the 15% of additional slots. How will the figure actually break down between the Crown dependencies and all the various regional airports?

Ian Blackford: There has been a dereliction of duty by the Secretary of State. The language being used is “up to 15%”. The harsh reality is that Scotland has lost slots in recent years, and we have lost connectivity. The Secretary of State should guarantee connectivity, but he has failed to do so time and again.

Alan Brown: I think that my right hon. Friend was making a rhetorical intervention.

I raised my concerns about slot protection when the Secretary of State came to the Dispatch Box and made his statement about the NPS. He will be aware that I followed up in writing to seek clarity and assurances, including on the fact that Scotland could have several PSOs if necessary. I asked him how many slots would be protected and what the reality of “up to 15%” would be. I also asked him whether there would be an absolute minimum that the UK Government would seek agreement on, and what percentage of the 15% would be for new routes rather than just additional slots. Just prior to that, a few days after giving the statement, the Secretary offered me a meeting. I stated I was happy to meet him and work with him, but I was instead left with last-minute phone calls with the aviation Minister, who is an unelected peer—not accountable to this place and not even able to come to the Dispatch Box tonight.
Following that there was a letter and DfT public announcements, which were pre-planned anyway. I acknowledge that there has been welcome movement in terms of airport-to-airport PSOs, and the Government have set out the fact that Scotland can have more than one PSO. But I repeat: there is no clarity or assurances regarding how these can or will be implemented. We do not even know whether any money has been set aside or whether there has been any cost analysis of the Government saying that they will provide these PSOs.

If the Heathrow expansion goes ahead and the airlines do forgo their domestic slots for more lucrative international slots—in, say, eight years’ time—what actual obligation is there on a UK Government at that moment in time to act and bring in PSOs? I would suggest that there is none. We cannot bind a future Government, especially given how the provision is set out just now, and that is a critical concern.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that he seeks clarity and certainty on what extra slots Scotland will get if the Heathrow expansion goes ahead. I put it to him that the clarity has come from the Secretary of State—that, without Heathrow expansion, there will be no extra slots for Scotland. Will the hon. Gentleman support the expansion this evening?

Alan Brown: Well, it is a daft point because it assumes that, if Heathrow goes ahead, the slots will somehow magically be there for Scotland. That is not the point, and that is why we are asking for these guarantees.

Ian Paisley: I really appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way again because it is absolutely essential that the House understands that four out of eight of the domestic routes that are already available go to Scotland. Scotland already stands strong in this area. It does not need protection measures. Indeed, British Airways has already expanded its routes to Inverness.

Alan Brown: The fact is that Scotland has lost a lot of domestic connectivity over the last few years, so the hon. Gentleman is not quite right. It is good that he sees Scotland as strong, but we want to be stronger and we want further connections.

As we have already heard, the Department for Transport said that there would be 100 extra flights a week to Scotland. Although it is now saying that there could be 200 flights coming from Heathrow, it is up to the Government to provide the protections. Let us take the figure of 100 that has been quoted. If, say, Dundee and Prestwick get the new suggested slots, even just a twice-daily service from each of those airports would equate to well over half that figure of 100 flights. When we take the rest and spread it over the rest of Scotland’s airports, it is not actually a great deal of increased connectivity. That is why this falls short of our expectations.

Heathrow airport has made it abundantly clear that it is willing to work with the UK Government on the matter, and acknowledges that it is a Government function to deliver that protection. As has been touched on already, Heathrow has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Scottish Government. The airport has been very open and communicative with both me and my predecessor in the SNP’s transport spokesperson role. I believe that it really wants to deliver on its commitments to Scotland, including the preconstruction logistics hub, for which I appreciate it is currently doing an ongoing assessment. I hope that that assessment concludes that Prestwick airport is successful, because that would be really good for my local area. There is also a stated minimum value of £300 million construction and supply chain contracts for Scotland, and a minimum peak construction job creation of 100 jobs.

Heathrow committed to a £10 passenger fee discount to Scottish airports, and, to be fair, it has since increased that reduction to £15 per passenger. It committed £1.5 million to advertising through a Scotland-specific marketing fund, and it has delivered on that, with only £250,000 outstanding, which it has pledged to use to promote the new V&A museum in Dundee. It has also confirmed that it is now working with VisitScotland to provide a takeover of a gate room to promote Scotland for a five-year period, equating to some £300,000. Cynics will say that it is bound to do these things to keep Scottish MPs and the Scottish Government onside. However, it seems to me that it has delivered to date, and over-delivered in some aspects, so I can only take it at face value.

In the bigger picture, 16,000 jobs are predicted to be generated in Scotland through an expanded Heathrow. These are certainly benefits that I want to see delivered.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with his namesake, Keith Brown, the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy in the Scottish Parliament, who supports the expansion of Heathrow and spoke about it very strongly in 2016? Does he not agree that the jobs he mentions simply will not come if there is not an expansion?

Alan Brown: As I said, I have spoken in favour of expansion before. The Scottish Government have also spoken in favour of it—that is why they have signed a memorandum of understanding. We are just looking for protections and deliverability.

Some people have asked, why Heathrow and not further expansion in Scotland? We have to acknowledge the reality that Heathrow has been the hub airport for the UK for 40 years, and there is not the critical mass in Scotland for getting such a hub-status airport. That is why the Scottish airports have supported the principle of Heathrow expansion.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: No, I need to make progress.

Some of my other concerns relate to the UK Government’s responses to the Transport Committee. The Secretary of State said that he had acted on 24 out of 25 of its recommendations, but that painted a more proactive representation than what the Government have actually taken on board. Their responses have not been robust enough. I am sure that the Chair of the Committee will cover these aspects later on. My key concerns include the response to recommendation 12, which is about airport charges being held flat in real terms. This would address some of the wider concerns about the cost of the expansion being passed on directly to the airlines. The UK Government have said that expansion cannot come at any cost, yet they are passing the buck to the Civil Aviation Authority.
Recommendation 25 is about policy and ways to maximise other runway capacity across the UK. That is not a make-or-break condition, but it would have been nice if the UK Government had got this policy in place at the same time as they are bringing this proposal forward. On the air quality issues in the Committee’s recommendations 3 to 6, the Government need to confirm that Heathrow’s triple lock is sufficient and that development consent will be robust enough to address those issues. More importantly, it needs to be confirmed that the expansion of Heathrow will not compromise obligations on climate change.

I have outlined my concerns—

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex)(Con): Well done—jolly good so far!

Alan Brown: I was going to fast-forward there, but I think the House wants to hear me speak for a wee bit longer, so I am quite happy to do that.

This is a project where people tailor their arguments to try and bring other people onside. In a recent Westminster Hall debate, I had Tory rebels urging me not to vote with nasty Tories, and Tory and Labour MPs expressing their concerns about what Heathrow expansion would mean for an independent Scotland. I heard concern from the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) that this investment will take away infrastructure investment in Scotland. Frankly, these are all false arguments.

The announcement of a multi-billion-pound infrastructure project should be good news. The predicted job growth and opportunities for Scotland should be good news, and certainly businesses see the merit in the expansion proposals. As I said, I want the jobs to come to Scotland. I want a logistics hub at Prestwick, and I want the additional regional airport connectivity—but crucially, I want these aspects guaranteed, and that is where the UK Government have fallen short. I have been supportive to date. I certainly will not vote against these proposals, because of what I hope the opportunities are for Scotland, but given that the UK Government cannot and will not provide these guarantees, I also cannot, unfortunately, vote with the Government.

7.15 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): There is no doubt that large-scale infrastructure projects will always be controversial, and no doubt that this is a large-scale infrastructure project that is incredibly controversial. That is one of the reasons why the coalition Government asked the Davies commission to do a report. That was supported by the House at the time, including by the Opposition. It was an attempt to try to get an expert opinion to take us forward through a report that we could take a proper decision on.

I am incredibly disappointed by the way that the SNP has responded today, because a big issue like this needs cross-party support to take it forward. These things do not happen in one Parliament; they go forward over many Parliaments. I heard the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) question the Secretary of State on 5 June, just 20 days ago, when he said:

“To be fair, Heathrow has engaged fully with the Scottish Government, and has signed a memorandum of understanding in relation to commitments”.

He went on to say:

“However, all but one of the Scottish airport operators support it. So do many Scottish chambers of commerce, because they recognise the business benefits that it can bring to Scotland, including...16,000 new jobs. That helped to sway me, and the Scottish Government have reiterated their support.”—[Official Report, 5 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 175.]

Well, support means votes. It does not mean trying to abstain at the end of the day when an important decision like this comes about. However, I can assure the SNP that the Secretary of State for Scotland will carry on making the case for Scotland in the House of Commons and at the Cabinet table, and so will my 13 colleagues who represent Scottish constituencies. The people of Scotland can feel let down by the SNP for playing party politics, because that is absolutely all that this decision is about.

Chris Grayling: I thank my right hon. Friend for the important point that he is making. Will he join me in paying tribute to Scotland’s best representatives—the team of Conservatives who would not play party games like those we have just heard and who are acting truly in the interests of Scotland and the Scottish people?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I urge SNP Members, even at this late stage, to change their minds on this and follow through on what they say they support with their votes, because this is too important a matter not to do so.

It is now 50 years since the Roskill commission first started its work on expansion. I was first made a junior Minister in the Department of Transport in 1989. I was originally told that I was going to be the Minister for roads, but the then Secretary of State, Cecil Parkinson, informed me that I was going to be the Minister for aviation and shipping—which was a bit of a surprise to me, especially bearing in mind my fear of flying at the time. In 1989, there were 366,430 air traffic movements at Heathrow airport. We have gradually seen those grow, up until 2006, when the figure was 477,000 movements a year, peaking in 2011 at 480,000. There has been growth and expansion at Heathrow, and during that time NOx emissions have in fact reduced. That has come about partly due to newer and better aircraft. I think that Heathrow has got the message that it has to improve on environmental issues, and that has moved substantially up the track.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the other change at Heathrow over that period is the massive improvement in connectivity? HS2, which he contributed to, will be part of that process, and Crossrail is another part of it. Heathrow is massively more connected now than it ever was in the early 1990s.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and agree with him.

I fully understand that my colleagues who represent local seats say that this is wrong for their constituents, but one question they need to address is: change or no change? Without the expansion, there will be no change. With the expansion, there will be a number of changes—not least, an extension of the ban on scheduled night flights to six-and-a-half hours, legally binding noise envelopes, predictable periods of respite for every local community, extending compensation to more than 3,000 additional properties, a £1 billion compensation package for
local people, a new independent community engagement board, a new independent noise authority and 10,000 apprenticeships. That is why it is rather disappointing to hear the Labour Front Benchers change their tune today, in a way that some leading trade unionists who support the project have not done.

“The benefits of a third runway at Heathrow to our members are clear and compelling: 180,000 new jobs, doubling the number of apprenticeships to 10,000 and £187 billion in economic benefits.” Those are not my words; they are the words of Len McCluskey, along with four other trade union leaders. That is the point they have made.

What has changed since the setting up of the Davies commission is the revolution on the Labour Benches, which has seen the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) assume the role of shadow Chancellor. I accept that he has long been an opponent of this scheme, but the truth of the matter is that setting up the Davies commission in 2012 to do a detailed investigation into the right way forward was the right thing to do. It was not just Howard Davies, but also John Armitt and Professor Dame Julia King, who is a leading expert in the environment.

In the past 10 years, we have seen £12 billion of investment in Heathrow airport, which has been very beneficial to the airport and to the country. Part of that—[Interruption.]/Sorry, I thought the shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), wished to intervene, but he does not. That investment has been very welcome, and it has led to a better facility for passengers.

One thing that the Government have to do—I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State takes this fully on board—is to ensure that this expansion is done to budget. There have already been trimmings on the cost of the original scheme, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on driving that. The CAA must ensure that that happens, so that we do not put too much extra cost on travelling passengers or indeed the plane operators. That will be very important for the future of Heathrow, and it is well aware of that. We are seeing investment proposals.

**Sir Nicholas Soames:** I congratulate my right hon. Friend on everything that he did on this when he was Secretary of State. Does he agree that the whole credibility of this vast scheme will depend on control of the cost and the way in which that is transparent to the House?

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. When the Secretary of State made his statement three weeks ago, I raised that point with him, and he was very clear on it.

This is one of the biggest infrastructure projects that the country faces over the next 10 years. We have been better on infrastructure over the past few years. We are about to see the opening of the Elizabeth line, which will make a tremendous difference, including to Heathrow airport, and that has been part of the investment cost. This is long planned and long overdue. I believe that this is the right scheme to go for, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on bringing forward these proposals.

7.25 pm

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Fast, reliable and affordable transport has the power to make a real difference to people’s lives. That is why I am a passionate believer in the transformative power of improving transport. If Britain is to have any chance of succeeding in a post-Brexit world, improved connectivity, both outside our islands and around them, is key. Among the most pressing of the challenges facing our transport system is the need for additional airport capacity in the south-east of England. Failure to address that challenge will mean less choice, more disruption and higher air fares for UK passengers. Along with the other members of the Transport Committee, I agree that building an additional runway at Heathrow is, in principle, the right answer to our aviation capacity challenge, provided there are safeguards and mitigations to protect passengers and affected communities.

The Secretary of State has already set out the economic benefits that could be achieved with expansion. The case is compelling, but have the Government been as candid with MPs and the public as this decision deserves, acknowledging not just the benefits but the costs and risks? Ensuring that the NPS properly reflects the weight of evidence in the supporting documents was the first objective of the Transport Committee’s report. Our Committee’s detailed analysis of the Department for Transport’s forecasts revealed that future passenger growth, and the destination and route offering at the UK level, are broadly similar over the longer term to those of the other schemes. That is not reflected in the final NPS.

At the current costs anticipated for the north-west runway scheme, there is a very real possibility that domestic routes from Heathrow will not be commercially viable. Ministers have told us that they intend to use public service obligations to guarantee regional connections, yet their own 2013 guidance on the use of PSOs states: “Government considers it unlikely that PSOs would be appropriate for new routes from the regions to London.”

What has changed since 2013 to make a policy that was ruled out then viable today? Even if PSOs could be used, it is not clear what level of subsidy would be needed and whether those subsidies would be provided in perpetuity.

**Justine Greening:** That is an important point, and it has not yet been raised—PSOs will require subsidies. For example, in Cornwall, Cornish taxpayers are subsidising the PSO, but those flights are to Gatwick. If Heathrow has a PSO, it will be way more expensive for taxpayers, and they are unaware of that.

**Lilian Greenwood:** I hope the Minister addresses the issues around PSOs in his closing remarks.

The analysis supporting the decision is extensive; what is lacking is a fair and transparent representation of the information in the NPS to the House. For example, the Committee’s scrutiny revealed that the Department’s methods of presentation hid compelling noise modelling showing that more than 300,000 people are estimated to be newly affected by significant noise annoyance due to an expanded Heathrow. The total number of people in the noise annoyance footprint is estimated to be more than 1.15 million. Our investigations also indicated that the scale of potential impacts.

**Chris Grayling:** I hear what the hon. Lady says, but will she confirm that I made that clear in my statement to the House on the publication of the draft NPS? I also
indicated that we expected that that would be a temporary process while technology changed, and that those figures assumed no mitigation measures, whereas we intend significant mitigation measures, including, for example, the night flight ban.

Lilian Greenwood: The Secretary of State has clarified that issue. I simply want to ensure that Members have the full range of information in front of them before they vote this evening.

There are many instances where the assumptions underpinning the analysis misrepresented what was likely to occur in practice. For example, the Department has assumed that all the capacity will be filled within two years of an opening date in 2026, yet Heathrow’s own business plan expects phased expansion over five to 10 years. Earlier this month, the Secretary of State told the House:

“We have accepted the recommendations...and will follow faithfully the Select Committee’s wishes to make sure that its recommendations are properly addressed at each stage of the process.”—[Official Report, 5 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 174.]

These are fine words but, disappointingly, they are not matched with actions, and the NPS has not been updated.

The second objective of our Committee’s scrutiny was to ensure that the NPS provided suitable safeguards for passengers and affected communities. We know that the Government have been struggling to deal with air quality in London for years. The Committee made two recommendations on changing the wording of the NPS to provide air quality safeguards. The Government did not accept these recommendations. On noise, we wanted to ensure that there were clear safeguards for communities, including guaranteed respite. The Government did not accept most of our recommendations to safeguard communities from noise impacts. On surface access, we recommended a condition of approval to ensure that the scheme would not result in more airport-related traffic on London’s roads. The Government did not accept that recommendation.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Lady confirm that if there is a point of disagreement between us, it is simply that we accepted the Committee’s recommendations but also said that the appropriate moment to insert them would be at the development consent order stage, rather than the NPS stage? Will she confirm that we have very clearly said that we will insert those at the DCO stage?

Lilian Greenwood: I confirm that that is the Secretary of State’s view, and I will come on to my concerns about that approach in due course.

On protections for communities, we recommended that compensation be independently assessed and reviewed once the full impacts were known. The Government did not accept this recommendation. On protection for passengers, we recommended a condition of approval in the NPS that passenger charges be held flat in real terms unless not doing so was in their interests. The Government did not accept this recommendation.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lilian Greenwood: No. I am conscious of time.

The Committee did not make a specific recommendation on carbon emissions, but the NPS scheme must be compatible with our climate change obligations. As others have already said, this remains very uncertain. The Government have told us that their recommendations will be dealt with during the development consent order process, in consultation with communities and other stakeholders, but our recommendations were made on the basis that there were not enough safeguards in the DCO process to ensure that high-level policy objectives on noise, air quality, surface access, regional connectivity and costs could be achieved.

The third objective of the Committee’s recommendations was to limit the risk of legal challenge, yet not providing fundamentally important information on possible environmental, health and community impacts seems to be a point on which a judicial review may be focused. Baroness Sugg told us recently that making the meaningful changes to the NPS we sought would add a six to nine-month delay to the process. Given the potential scale of the impacts of this scheme and the decades it has taken to get to this point, a few extra months may seem an appropriate price to pay, especially given the Government’s self-imposed delays since the Airports Commission reported in July 2015.

This is a vital decision about our national infrastructure. Additional runway capacity must be delivered. I do not doubt the Government’s intent, but rather their ability to deliver. Some of my Select Committee colleagues will accept the Government’s assurances, but I intend to be guided by the evidence. I have no doubt that the Government intended their air quality plans to ensure compliance with legal standards, but three times the courts rejected them. I am certain that the Department for Transport intended to electrify 850 miles of railway and to introduce new rail timetables successfully but, as we know, the reality has sometimes fallen short of the ambition. This NPS leaves too many risks: the risk of a successful legal challenge; the risk of harming communities; the risk of rising charges; and the risk of a failure to deliver new domestic connections. If a substantial proportion of the Committee’s recommendations had been incorporated, I would have felt able to vote for the motion. I wish that I could do so but, without them, I am afraid that I cannot.

7.34 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who made a very powerful speech.

I do not think that the proposal before the House will be seen as Parliament’s finest hour. It is very easy to dismiss the contributions of MPs perhaps who have communities overflown by Heathrow planes, but nearly 3 million Londoners will be affected if this expansion goes ahead. However, this is actually a vote that will affect all our communities in one way or another.

I think that the story of Heathrow is a story of broken promises, broken politics and broken economics. Those of us with communities around Heathrow know about Heathrow’s broken promises better than anyone else. There has been no action, despite promises, on night flights. The first flight over my community’s homes today was at 4.29 this morning. Under this proposal, we will actually end up with more early morning flights,
not fewer. There has been no action on sticking even to existing rules on respite. I have been at public meetings at which the current Heathrow management has said that the previous promises made by previous managers should never have been made. Regional MPs who are banking on promises from Heathrow should bear that in mind when they sign up to this proposal today.

Of course, the ultimate broken promise was when the fifth terminal got planning permission. There was an express condition for local people of having no third runway, but look at where we are today. The bottom line is that any assurances in the development consent order are literally not worth the paper they are written on. Dare I say it, but with the greatest respect, Ministers have long gone by the time those Members who are promised that their regional airports will get extra connections find out that those connections have not materialised. Such a “facts of life” explanation to them from a future Minister will be that their county council has to pay perhaps £10 million a year for their route to Heathrow. The problem, however, will be that no airline will want to provide it, because that is not a big enough subsidy, and doing so would be uneconomic. There have been broken promises in the past, and there are more to come for other MPs from Heathrow Airport Ltd.

What about broken politics? As we have heard, MPs are not being shown any kind of proper planning for a third runway. There will be 28 million extra passengers a year, but there is a promise from Heathrow that not a single extra car journey will happen. How is that going to be achieved? We do not have a plan for that. West London is illegally breaching air pollution limits, and there are similar problems in my own community. Expanding Heathrow makes that significantly worse. There is no plan at all.

No flight paths have been published today for communities to see. There is no plan on tackling carbon emissions. There is no plan on how to ring-fence domestic routes, as promised. Members might be interested to hear that the regional air connectivity fund set off with 11 new routes in 2016, but just two are still operating, and those are doing so at reduced frequency because they were not economic. There is no plan on how to have a freight hub in such a congested area. There is no assessment of how the resultant congestion charge that will become necessary will affect the west London economy.

Of most concern to people in this House is the fact that there has been no formal safety review—yet—even though the crash risk goes up by 60% in the most densely populated bit of the country, including my own community. When the Health and Safety Laboratory did its estimate of that crash risk, it asked DFT officials whether they wanted the population numbers impacted by the crash risk to be modelled, and they were told no, that was not necessary. Safety has been far from the top priority of the Department for Transport.

The process to create what little planning there is has been totally flawed. Consultations are never—I repeat, never—listened to. The Airports Commission got its numbers wrong. MPs have been given erroneous impressions of the impact on regional airports. The Government have had to reissue the draft NPS because its numbers were incorrect. Parliamentary questions have not been properly answered in the very short time MPs have had to ask them since the statement was first made. People simply get ignored in this process. They have to be either a big business or a big union before their voice counts, and that is totally unacceptable.

After all that, the DFT disagrees with its own analysis. It picks the project that it shows has a lower level of total benefits to passengers and the wider economy than Gatwick. It picks the project that is likely to need the biggest taxpayer subsidy. It picks the project that is the most risky by far. It picks the project that cannibalises the transport budget for the rest of the country. It picks the project that harms the growth of regional airports. That is why this is a story of broken economics. Even Heathrow knows that this is risky, which is why it has a poison-pill cost-recovery clause in the pre-legal contract, effectively outsourcing the economic risk to taxpayers.

Heathrow knows that there is a massive risk of the project going belly up. When that happens, it will be in a strong position to turn round and ask taxpayers to pay. When it turns out that the problem of air pollution is insurmountable, we will be asked to pay for the runway that it cannot use.

Zac Goldsmith: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent, forensic speech. It has been said in the debate that without cross-party support we cannot hope to deliver an infrastructure project of this magnitude. Three of the four main parties in the House are not in favour of the scheme. Does she not think that that adds to the undeliverability of the project?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. This requires cross-party support, which is simply not there. Heathrow’s problem is that it is a hub airport in the wrong place, which means that it is expensive. Passenger charges are 40% more expensive than at rival European airports. That is why Leeds Bradford routes have been cut. It is not because there is no space—it already has space—but because those routes are simply uneconomic.

Steve Double: My understanding is that flights have been cut on those routes because of the unavailability of aircraft and crew, not because of the cost.

Justine Greening: No, Leeds Bradford has tended to hub out of Schiphol because it is cheaper. This is about economics, which matter. The bottom line is that in expanding Heathrow the economics and the expensiveness of the airport become worse, putting more pressure on domestic flights, with a loss of flights to emerging markets. Flights to places such as Dar es Salaam and Osaka, for example, have been cut.

In today’s vote, Heathrow Airport Ltd is seeking to go one further than outsourcing economic risk to the taxpayer. It wants to outsource political risk to MPs who are prepared to sign up to its project today. We know that in the end it will not deliver for the regions or communities. I am not surprised that the Scottish National party has begun to see through the proposal. I hope that it continues to see through it, and I wish that it would vote against it today.

There is an alternative: a proper regional strategy for airports around the UK, including in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and around our country in England, which would bring connectivity to the world for communities that need and deserve it, and regional economies too, bringing investment direct to the door.
As I said, we have just had the first non-stop flight from Sydney to London. Direct flights—people being able to go from A to B—are the future of aviation. Low-cost carriers are moving into that market. They want to operate out of cheap airports, on the doorstep of communities and regions that need them—not an over-expensive airport at Heathrow.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you asked me to come up with the most backward-looking, ill-thought-through, poorly bottomed-out, badly articulated, on a wing and a prayer, bad value-for-money, most polluting airport plan I could find, this would be it. It is hugely polluting for my local community. To have only a four-hour debate on such a monumental infrastructure decision is an absolute disgrace. I am staggered that the House is seriously contemplating voting for the fantasy economics attached to such an expensive and risky airport plan. If we vote for that tonight, it will be proven that the House has not done due diligence properly, and people should rightly hold us to account for that. I will certainly vote against the proposal, not just on behalf of my community but on behalf of my country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call John McDonnell. The time limit will go down to six minutes after John McDonnell.

7.44 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I shall seek to go under eight minutes if I can, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Speaker for allowing me to speak from the Back Benches, given the direct impact of the proposal on my constituency and my constituents, who find the whole debate heartbreaking.

Occasionally in the House there are defining moments, and I think that this is a defining moment on a number of issues. It is a defining vote tonight. As we have heard in the debate, it is a defining vote, first, on climate change. The evidence from the Select Committee on Transport and others basically outlines the fact that if we are to tackle climate change, as the Committee on Climate Change said, we have to restrict the growth of aviation to 55%. However, as has been evidenced in the debate, it looks as if it might hit 90% or 100% by 2050. As a result of Heathrow expansion, that means that regional airports will have to be constrained or, as the Committee on Climate Change said, other sectors of industry will be constrained within our economy. To be frank, on past evidence we will not meet those targets, so we will jeopardise our potential to tackle climate change.

The second issue that has been raised in our discussions is whether we are going to tackle the grotesque inequalities of investment geographically across the country. Tonight, we have learned from some of the views that have been expressed that we will not do so. The economic benefits were announced by the Airports Commission: we were meant to gain £147 billion. The Government reduced that figure to £74 billion, then to £72 billion. Now we know that that was the gross benefit, and that the present net value ranges from £3 billion over 60 years to minus £2 billion. If there is a 1% delay in the project, that is completely wiped out. Costs will not be borne by Heathrow Airport Ltd, because it has a leverage rate—a debt to asset value—of 85%. If it expands that will be over 90%. When the Government—not with my wishes—privatised the National Air Traffic Services, we prevented companies from bidding if they went anywhere near 65%. Heathrow will not find the money—the cost will be borne by taxpayers. The biggest taxpayer burden will be the surface infrastructure, assessed by Transport for London as £15 billion.

That money will come from investments, but they will not be in London and the south-east, and we will see delays and the ending of investments in transport and infrastructure around the country. We have heard about the growth of regional airports being held back, but the proposal will hold back growth in road and rail, along with all the benefits of infrastructure.

Ruth Cadbury: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the much needed infrastructure promised as part of this statement—the southern and western rail links, along with Crossrail—have been on the cards for many years, and are needed for the existing number of passengers at Heathrow?

John McDonnell: It is an obvious point that we have made time and again in the House. We have been pressing for investment in infrastructure for the existing airport, but it has not been forthcoming.

We do not even know what the infrastructure plan is for the area. Last time, the infrastructure plan included a road through my local cemetery. We were meant to disinter the dead to enable access to Heathrow. We have still not seen the infrastructure plans. No wonder my constituents are angry about this. That is the third defining point. Does the House stand up for people and communities, especially working-class communities, or does it stand up to protect the interests of a corporate cartel that has ripped us off for decades? Ask how much—

Kwasi Kwarteng rose—

John McDonnell: I would respect the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, if he accepted a runway in his constituency south of Heathrow, but he refused.

Look at how much corporation tax has been paid by this company over the past 10 years: £24 million. It has been borrowing to pay dividends more than its profit ratios. That is the nature of the company we are dealing with. It is a company and an operation at Heathrow that has lied to my constituents. When it got the fifth terminal, a letter was sent to my constituents. I had meetings with the directors of Heathrow and they were beside me saying, “We will not seek a third runway.” Within 12 months, they were lobbying for one. We were told by a former Conservative Prime Minister, “No ifs, no buts, no third runway.” They never told us that promise was for one Parliament. The existing Prime Minister backed that guarantee to my constituents.

These are the consequences for my constituents that hon. Members need to know: 4,000 homes will go; 8,000 to 10,000 people will be forcibly removed from their community, the biggest forced removal of human beings since the Scottish highland clearances; and a church, a temple, community centres, open spaces and even our hospices are now threatened. That is what it means to my community. Two schools—where will they go? It is
no good offering them 125% compensation. You cannot compensate for the loss of your whole community. We have a housing crisis in our area on a scale not seen since the second world war. We cannot house our existing population. Where will they go? Two schools, at least, closed, with another one, most probably, after that. We have not got enough places for our existing pupils. Where will they go? We cannot find sites to build the new schools we currently need.

Those who get forced out might be the lucky ones, because the ones left behind are already breathing in air that is already poisoned above 2010 EU limits. No effective mitigation measures have been demonstrated to us tonight. We know the health consequences—respiratory conditions and cancer—yet the Government have refused to undertake a comprehensive health assessment.

Andy McDonald: Is my right hon. Friend as surprised as I am that there is nothing specific in the revised national policy statement that adequately sets out a framework for dealing with our air pollution crisis?

John McDonnell: We have 9,000 people a year in London dying from air pollution, yet there is nothing in the Government proposals that goes anywhere near even thinking about tackling these issues. Those are the consequences for my community, despite all the promises they have been given that their homes would be secure. These are villages that have been there for 1,000 years, to be wiped off the face of the earth—and for what? To ensure that a company maximises its profits. This is a company owned by Ferrovial, which was founded by Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: I will finish on this point, because other Members want to speak.

This decision tonight will likely go through, but there will inevitably be legal challenges from a cross-party group and the London boroughs, as well as the Mayor of London. I believe, like last time, that those legal challenges will win. We will be left, yet again, with not tackling the real problem of developing a real aviation strategy that builds on the five airports around London, develops the regional airports we need, and connects them up with the rail and road infrastructure we desperately need. We will be back here yet again, having failed. I tell Members this as well: if the courts do not decide this, there will be a campaign. This will be the iconic, totemic battleground of climate change, which will attract protesters and campaigners from across Europe. This issue will not go away.

Before Members vote, I want to leave them with one thing in their mind: remember the name Armelle Thomas, a resident of Harmsworth. Her husband, my friend, died a short while back. Tommy Thomas came to this country during the second world war to fight for this country against fascism. He flew airplanes for the RAF on some of the most dangerous secret missions into France. Armelle is his widow. His home that he built up with Armelle is in the centre of what will be the runway itself. There are human costs to this decision that Members need to recognise and contemplate before they vote tonight to worry and blight my community once again on a project that will never—pardon the pun—take off.

7.55 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): May I begin by first commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for resigning on a point of principle to stand up for his constituents in the way that he made public at the last election? Similarly, in two general elections, 2015 and 2017, I stood on the position that I would support airport expansion in south-east England. That is why, this evening, I will be supporting the Government. However, I want to make a few points about the local impact of that decision and some broader points on the capacity of this country to make strategic decisions about the infrastructure it requires in future.

I came to the decision I did in 2013 because, on balance, the socioeconomic impact on my constituency was positive if we expanded capacity in the south-east of England, at both Gatwick and Heathrow. I am in favour of the expansion of both airports for that reason. It did not go unnoticed—I promise hon. Members that my postbag was large—that the impact of noise in my constituency was significant and, indeed, had grown, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said in an intervention, because of the unilateral decision by the National Air Traffic Services to change the flight pattern, with no prior notice to anybody—including the airport itself. That impact has been significant. Despite that, I have stayed true to my word, recognising that an expansion of airport capacity in the south-east is, on balance, to the benefit of my constituents.

I say to colleagues on both sides of the House: let us be realistic about the world in which we live. In this post-Brexit world that the country voted for, there is little avoiding the fact that we are going to need intercontinental connections. This is what the country voted for. It is going to have an impact on the environment, a point made so eloquently and passionately by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), but it is what the public voted for. Until we invent a means of transport that flies through the air and does not rely on the combustion of fossil fuels, that is going to be the case. I therefore ask the Government to recognise that fact and that they need to take the issue of noise in particular seriously—I know they do: they have made some assurances today for that reason. But they must also recognise that the way the world works at the moment is not sustainable.

We must look at how the global economy works and the impact that that is having on the need for people to travel. All travel at the moment involves carbon dioxide being released into the air. As far as I am concerned—it is 17th-century physics—that is having an impact on the environment. It is extremely important that Britain takes that seriously and engages internationally on this issue.

I will not take all of my time, because I know colleagues want to speak. My final plea is on strategic thinking. Take a look at how long it took to build terminal 5. As I recall, it took eight years to get planning permission. Take a look at how long it has taken to build HS2—I am not a big fan of HS2: the future is fast data, not fast people, and I struggle with the justification for that project.
Take a look at the world that we are growing into—an ageing world where, in future, transportation may be more domestic than international, because we need to look after our elderly. Take a look at the future in terms of who we are competing with and who we want to trade with. Do we want to trade with countries if it then involves significant pollution from the transport of their goods by boat and plane to our shores, or do we want to trade with countries closer to home?

If I look at the decisions that we have made as a country over recent decades, involving both political parties, what comes out at me is a complete absence of strategy. The Government should create a unit that looks at the long-term, strategic approach of this country in the world where we currently live, and the world that we are growing into. That is long overdue. If we are going to make such decisions, we need to make them quickly. The world changes even more quickly now than it did when we first started talking about airport capacity. We need to be agile. Above all, we need to be competitive, but in being competitive we cannot lose sight of the impact that it will have on our local communities and the wider community across the globe. If Britain wants to be successful and lead the world in protecting our globe—our planet—it needs to get real about its long-term strategy.

8.1 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today’s debate. Finally, after decades of dithering, this House is being asked to trigger the process that could approve a third runway for Heathrow, the UK’s only hub airport. The debate on the expansion of aviation capacity in the south-east has always focused on balancing the importance of international connectivity with its impact on key local and international environmental issues, such as noise and emissions, but taking a decision has been put in the “too hard” box for far too long.

I support a third runway at Heathrow: the case for jobs and the economy is overwhelming. Heathrow has been virtually full for a decade for both passengers and freight. Failure to take a decision has already had consequences. Airports in the region have not benefited; instead, the UK has lost out to other hubs—to places such as Frankfurt, Paris, and Schiphol, and further afield, Dubai. Only this week it has been reported that Munich has now overtaken Heathrow for international connectivity. That has impeded the development of much needed trade outside Europe, and it has severe consequences for the economy. A 10% increase in air connectivity brings a 0.5% increase in per capita GDP.

Heathrow is particularly important for freight, especially to countries outside Europe. Adding one flight to each of Heathrow’s five routes to China would deliver an extra £16 million per annum to our economy, creating 530 jobs, and that cannot be done without the expansion of Heathrow. All the main business organisations, including the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and the British Chambers of Commerce, have repeatedly warned that cargo capacity to pivotal trading markets in Shanghai, Delhi and Dubai is virtually full. The CBI is concerned that if additional capacity is not available by 2030, we could lose £5 billion per annum in trade to Brazil, Russia, India and China alone. These concerns are echoed by the major trade unions. We ignore these warnings at our peril.

Expanding Heathrow is not an alternative to supporting airports in the regions. Airlines take commercial decisions about where they will fly: if Heathrow is full, the alternative has been another hub, such as Paris, Frankfurt or other airports—it has not been to move to the English regions. I support all efforts to develop airports in the regions, and that includes improving surface access, but the shortage of slots at Heathrow has weakened regional connectivity. Liverpool was squeezed out by Heathrow decades ago because of the shortage of slots. The commitment for 15% of new slots in an expanded Heathrow to be reserved for links to the regions is to be welcomed. For Liverpool John Lennon airport, Heathrow expansion offers a direct connection to international flights, plus a logistics hub, with the potential of a lasting legacy of construction and engineering skills for future generations, but it is essential that that is delivered.

The economic case for expanding Heathrow is overwhelming, but environmental concerns are critical as well. They could, and should, be addressed through the development consent process and other methods, such as taking steps to impose legally binding targets, better aircraft design, much improved public transport and a new use of airspace strategy.

Today is a watershed. We must draw a line under decades of dithering and take the bold decision that is required in the national interest. Expansion at Heathrow will link the UK to vital emerging markets, make it possible for airports outside the south-east to be connected to the hub, and bring jobs and opportunities across the country. The House should now take the responsible decision: support the national policy statement and back a third runway for Heathrow.

8.6 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I rise on behalf of my constituents to say that, in my judgment, this development is one that should be supported. About 750 of my constituents are directly employed at Heathrow airport, but many thousands more are economically dependent on its success.

It might well be that if we were starting from scratch, Heathrow airport would not be developed on the site where it is at present, but the reality is that in a country that is very crowded, particularly in the south-east of England, we have been quite successful in getting quarts into pint pots and minimising the environmental impact that might take place elsewhere if another hub airport had to be developed. The idea, for example, that we could successfully build one in the Thames estuary without vast amounts of environmental damage is simply fanciful. I am also convinced that we need a hub airport and that a capacity is being reached.

All those things take me to the view that this development, if it can be achieved within the environmental parameters, to which I shall come back in a moment, ought to be supported. I say that, I might add, even though I am probably going to be personally affected: living where I do in Hammersmith, I have absolutely no doubt that I shall be directly under the northern flight path into the airport.

My concerns, however, are these. First, there has been a consistent lack of strategic planning about the area around Heathrow airport. At the moment, many of my constituents, particularly in Iver, which is closest to the
airport, have their lives blighted by the consequences of that. Developments that were allowed to take place during the second world war, which are now linked to the airport's success, provide a level of planning blight that is exceptionally bad. Just to give an idea to the House, in Iver village, where two heavy goods vehicles cannot pass each other without going on to the pavement, one HGV per minute goes through the village street. All this is linked to the fact that Heathrow airport is an economic hub and presents real difficulties for my residents that, I might add, are going to continue even if this development does not go ahead.

Secondly, there is the problem of noise. It is difficult to make a judgment as to what the noise levels will be from the construction of a north-west runway, but there is no doubt that even today in the southernmost bit of my constituency, people are affected by the noise of aircraft on the ground. That, too, is going to have to be addressed, and I am very concerned that the current project does not necessarily envisage some of those residents being entitled to compensation. I was glad to hear from the Secretary of State today that that will be reviewed.

My third concern is about the entire environment in which I live. The Colne Valley is an area of biodiversity. It is also exceptionally attractive, and could be made much more so, if the proper investment went in. One of the things I look to from the development of a third runway is that some of those developments will be facilitated. If they are forthcoming, these developments, be they putting in the proper road infrastructure and an Iver relief road or environmental improvements in the Colne Valley, are capable of delivering a better outcome for my constituents and the environment than they have at present. That is one reason why, at this stage, I am prepared to support the scheme.

I am left with a slight sense that people see this vote as final. One should read what the NPS actually says. Paragraphs 112 through to 120 make clear the targets to be met if the Secretary of State is ever to sanction the project. That is one reason why, at this stage, I am prepared to support the scheme. I am left with a slight sense that people see this vote as final. One should read what the NPS actually says. Paragraphs 112 through to 120 make clear the targets to be met if the Secretary of State is ever to sanction the project. That is one reason why, at this stage, I am prepared to support the scheme. I am left with a slight sense that people see this vote as final. One should read what the NPS actually says. Paragraphs 112 through to 120 make clear the targets to be met if the Secretary of State is ever to sanction the project. That is one reason why, at this stage, I am prepared to support the scheme. I am left with a slight sense that people see this vote as final. One should read what the NPS actually says. Paragraphs 112 through to 120 make clear the targets to be met if the Secretary of State is ever to sanction the project. That is one reason why, at this stage, I am prepared to support the scheme.

**Justine Greening:** My right hon. and learned Friend has made an important point. The problem is that the assessment would come after Heathrow had spent probably billions of pounds on a runway that it was then unable to use, and it would seek to recover that from the taxpayer.

**Mr Grieve:** I take my right hon. Friend's point, but the modelling that will have to take place even before the development proceeds ought to be capable of identifying whether that will happen. If it is to fall on the taxpayer to compensate for the failure of the scheme once it starts, that is something the Secretary of State will have to take full account of before giving any approval.

For those reasons, and because I happen to believe that a hub airport is a necessity and cannot be avoided, and because I also believe that there are real economic benefits for this country that cannot be ignored, I am prepared tonight to support the Government—but, as I say, my support is conditional. If this project is to deliver a better future for our country generally and for local residents, the Government will have to show that they understand the wider considerations of environmental benefit and improvement that must go with it.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. After the next speaker, I am afraid that I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes, and I remind people that interventions mean that others might not be able to get in. I say that particularly to people who have already spoken.

8.13 pm

**Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): I start by expressing my respect for the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for having resigned from the Government over this issue. I, like him and quite a few other Members, am concerned partly about our own residents and partly about the wider national interest. We are being criticised in some quarters for being nimbys, but in this case our backyard is very large indeed. At present, 1 million people are affected by the 51 Leq—equivalent continuous sound level—noise contour, which is a good definition of serious impact, and that number will increase substantially.

The aspect of noise that I want to focus on, however, has already been alluded to by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and others, and this is the deliberate creation of flights along particular routes. The problem is aggravated by the absence of regulations governing the angle of take-off, which is judged by airlines specifically according to fuel savings. Tens of thousands of residents under take-off paths as well as landing paths are subject to extreme and prolonged forms of noise pollution. The question now is: how will the expansion of Heathrow affect that?

The number of flights is to increase by more than 50%, and the NPS says it would like to keep the proportion of people additionally affected to around 10%, so almost by definition those who will experience the greatest hardship and environmental damage will be those under the existing flight paths. I invite the Minister in reply to give some reassurance to those who have to deal with this noise sewage problem and say how that can be alleviated within the overall policy. We do not know the future flight paths or whether the Government will regulate to deal with some of the effects, but perhaps they could give us some assurances.

On the wider national picture, I strongly agree with the analysis of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I do not necessarily agree with his approach to public finances, but on the financing of the airport he is absolutely right. Heathrow Ltd is an exceedingly dodgy company by any reckoning: last year, its profits were just over £500 million, but it remitted in dividends over £700 million; it extracts rent in the form of monopoly rent from its existing holdings,
particularly its monopoly control of car parks; it has very little interest in development; and its balance sheet position is terrible—it has run down its shareholder funds from £5 billion to about £700 million and it has doubled its debt. It has no interest in development and no competence in managing the kind of risky project now envisaged. The only way the Government can cope is by underwriting the company. We know in practice, however, that the regulator, because of the regulatory asset base system of regulation at the airport, will increase landing charges to enable the investment to remain profitable. The worry expressed by people such as Willie Walsh, the chief executive of British Airways, is that passengers—or a combination of the taxpayer and passengers—will pay for the overrun.

The other aspect of cost that the right hon. Gentleman rightly referred to is the complete lack of a definition of who pays for the infrastructure costs outside the perimeter fence. We have a wide range of estimates, from £5 billion, in the Davies report, to £15 billion from Transport for London. The Government say they do not recognise the lesser figure, but what figure do they recognise? The developer have said they will come up with only £1 billion, so where will the remaining billions come from? I know that “the odd billion between friends” might be a good way of looking at this, from the Government’s point of view, but we need some precision and some protection for the public finances. Billions of pounds of public investment are ultimately likely to be involved, and given how the Treasury operates, with the rationing of capital, this will come at the expense of infrastructure projects in other parts of the country.

In my remaining minute, I want to say a bit about that regional impact. The assumption in the Government’s statement is that the regions will benefit, but they patently will not. There will be a rationing of capital and of landing rights because of carbon dioxide limits. Every one of the seven leading regional airports—Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, East Midlands, Bristol, and others—have made it absolutely clear that they oppose Heathrow expansion because it inhibits their own potential for developing point-to-point routes to other parts of the world. In terms of the aggregate picture, we have already been told that the net present value is close to zero, and actually heavily negative if we take out international transfer passengers, and on the specific issues, such as the availability of flights outside Europe for business passengers, only 2% of all flights fall in this category. For national and local reasons, therefore, I oppose the motion.

8.19 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): We have heard about some of the human and environmental consequences of the decision that we may be about to make, but it is worth repeating them. Heathrow is already the noisiest airport in the world, and a third runway will obviously make that problem worse. The Heathrow area has been in breach of air pollution laws for more than a decade. Expansion will mean 250,000 more flights, 25 million more road passenger journeys, and therefore, plainly, more pollution. A third runway will mean the destruction of old and entrenched communities such as those described by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)—I pay tribute to Armelle and her campaign against the third runway, which goes back many years. Thousands of homes will be destroyed to make way for the new runway. Families will be displaced and simply told to start again. Official forecasts tell us that Heathrow expansion is not reconcilable with the Climate Change Act 2008. Those are just some of the consequences of the way in which we are potentially likely to vote tonight.

Members would only sign off those costs if they believed that the economic upside justified it, but so much of what we have heard about the economic benefits is propaganda. It is not even very sophisticated propaganda. Heathrow bosses must be laughing out loud when they tell us that expansion can deliver 250,000 more flights without any extra car journeys, or that a third runway will mean that fewer people will be affected by noise.

Let me briefly say something about the economic case. In its 2014 report, on which the Government’s decision was based, the Airports Commission estimated that Heathrow expansion would deliver £147 billion worth of total economic benefit. The Government lapped it up, but then, in last year’s draft NPS, they quietly revised the figure down to between £72 billion and £74.2 billion—less than half the original estimate. Today’s NPS uses the same figure, but admits that it is a gross figure which does not include the actual economic and financial costs of the proposal.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the runway were ever built—in fact, it would be half a runway—it would be the most expensive place on earth on which to land, and that that would knock out the economics of improving our trade and connectivity?

Zac Goldsmith: As would be expected, my hon. Friend has made an impeccable point.

The net present value, a metric which does include all the costs and benefits, reduces the figure to between £2.9 billion and minus £2.5 billion over a 60-year period. So the upside has gone from £147 billion to minus £2.5 billion, yet the Government’s position has not budged.

It gets worse. A report from the New Economics Foundation shows that three quarters of any new capacity from a third runway will be taken up by international-to-international transfer passengers who never leave the airport. The Department for Transport’s own guidance says that they add nothing whatsoever to the economy, and should not be counted. If they are excluded—as the Government have recommended to themselves—the NPV is reduced by a further £5.5 billion, which produces a minus figure. DfT analysis also shows that an overrun in Heathrow’s costs of just 1% could be enough to negate the overall benefits of the scheme.

None of that, by the way, takes into account the point made by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) about Transport for London’s estimated £15 billion price tag for a link between the Heathrow expansion and surface level. It also does not take into account the legal and planning complexities that are unique to Heathrow. A gigantic legal challenge, backed by local authorities, City Hall and numerous organisations, is waiting around the corner from tonight’s vote.
This is what is so utterly perplexing. Why would we choose the most polluting, most disruptive, most expensive and least deliverable option, when the alternative is at least as environmentally beneficial, and vastly simpler to deliver? It is not because Heathrow will deliver more connectivity. According to every metric and every analysis, Gatwick and Heathrow deliver the same. Even the discredited Airports Commission’s own analysis predicts that whichever airport expands, the UK as a whole will achieve almost identical connectivity.

That brings me to the NPS. I am having to skip whole chunks of what I was going to say. The NPS is a horror story. The Secretary of State told the House that Heathrow expansion would “enable” growth at Birmingham, Newquay, Aberdeen, and other regional airports. That is nonsense. The Government’s own analysis shows that Heathrow expansion hinders growth at regional airports. It does not “enable” it. The Transport Committee found that if expansion goes ahead, there will be 74,000 fewer direct international flights per year to and from airports in the non-London regions in 2030, and that the figure will double by 2050.

In the last few seconds available to me, let me ask the Secretary of State to take this opportunity to put the record straight, because he has misled the House. We are being asked to approve a monstrous scheme, and I urge—beg, even—Members to look at the details before they cast their votes.

8.24 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I do not believe that a third runway at Heathrow is necessary or desirable, for all the reasons that have been set out so powerfully by other Members. I shall certainly vote against Heathrow expansion tonight. I entered the Chamber totally opposed to it, and what I have heard has convinced me that it is an absolute and total nonsense.

I do not wish to be wholly negative about the need for airport capacity, especially to serve the capital and the south-east. I have one major and specific alternative proposal to advance, which is serious, sensible and practicable. Let me say first, however, that it is clear that maximum use must be made of existing airport capacity in and around London. Indeed, that was emphasised in at least one Government policy statement, although another that was published at about the same time mysteriously missed out the reference.

This capacity will, of course, include London Luton airport, whose passenger numbers are rapidly increasing, and where substantial investment is happening now to cope with future demand. Luton airport is a major part of our local economy, and a booming success story. With new parallel taxiways and the coming generation of composite-bodied aircraft, our airport will be able to accommodate long-haul flights and millions more passengers. My primary concern today, however, is to propose an expansion of airport capacity to serve not just London and the south-east, but the midlands and beyond.

Very simply, my proposal is to link Birmingham airport to central London with a direct fast electrified rail link. The Great Western line linking Birmingham Snow Hill to Marylebone and Paddington should be electrified, and should include the rail link from Leamington Spa to Birmingham airport. With some modest upgrading and the restoration of a few miles of four tracks on the line and a direct link to Crossrail at the southern end, rapid direct services to and from central London will be possible. Indeed, that could also provide for a rapid rail service between Heathrow and Birmingham, again using Crossrail, in a hub-satellite relationship. That would be useful for Members, who would be able to take the Jubilee line from Westminster to Bond Street and then immediately get on to a train which would take them straight into the heart of Birmingham airport. The airport has a long runway to accommodate large, long-haul aircraft on intercontinental flights, and has at least 50% spare capacity.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Notwithstanding his vision for Birmingham, does my hon. Friend recognise that, according to official Government figures, there will be 40,000 fewer international point-to-point flights from Birmingham in 2040 if Heathrow expansion goes ahead?

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for making that powerful point.

There is massive extra capacity at Birmingham, and that seems likely to expand in the future. There is a railway station actually in the airport, linked via Leamington Spa to the main Great Western line. It is not a remote parkway station, but can provide direct rail travel right into the airport, much as happens at Gatwick. With 125-mph electrified trains, non-stop on the main route, journeys would take less than an hour from central London, and would be convenient and easy with no train changes required.

I have consulted, and have been advised by, experienced railway engineers who, like me, are convinced that this scheme would be perfectly practicable and inexpensive to build. I have also discussed the scheme with Paul Kehoe, who was recently chief executive of Birmingham airport, and is an old friend who was formerly airport director at Luton. He, too, considers the scheme to be eminently feasible and perfectly practicable. Many Members rightly believe that we should seek to develop our regional economy economies, with more emphasis on regional airports. I believe that developing Birmingham airport will meet that challenge too, while also making a potentially massive contribution to south-east aviation needs.

I urge Ministers to give serious consideration to what I propose, and to think again about Heathrow expansion.
[Iain Stewart]

I started my journey with an open mind—I did not have a preference for any airport. Indeed, I was not even convinced that we needed airport expansion in the first place. I looked favourably on suggestions that a proper high-speed rail network would free up enough domestic capacity at our international airports to create space for the long-hauls. However, having looked at all the evidence in detail, I am convinced that we do need the expansion of a hub airport over point-to-point capacity—both are important, but we need the hub option—and that the location for that should be Heathrow. Gatwick has many advantages, but it is on the wrong side of London for most of the rest of the country. It is also one of the primary freight hubs, and we need that freight capacity in the holds of passenger aircraft to make many routes viable. It is essential for our long-term international trading interests that we have this expanded capacity.

I was agnostic about whether we should choose the third runway or the Heathrow hub option. Neither of the options is perfect; each has its advantages and disadvantages. We also have to contend with the uncertainty of forecasting many decades into the future.

It is important to point out that the current Select Committee’s inquiry looked only at the current Heathrow option; it did not conduct a comparative analysis of Gatwick or the Heathrow hub option. That was not in our remit, but had we done that, I am sure we would have found shortcomings in the other schemes as well.

We also did not look at the comparative costs of not proceeding—the huge economic cost to this country of not building new airport capacity at this point, when Schiphol, Frankfurt, Charles de Gaulle, Istanbul and Dubai would mop up our markets. What is the opportunity cost environmentally of not proceeding at this point, given the emissions from aircraft both circling in the air and on the ground now?

I am satisfied that the Government are listening to the Select Committee’s recommendations, if not in the NPS then at some other point in the process. I am also satisfied that technology will help to address many of the justifiable concerns that people have. Aircraft technology will deliver quieter and less polluting planes. Electric vehicles will remove many of the surface access concerns, and there are solutions so that moving aircraft from the stand to the runway involves less emissions. All in all, we cannot afford to delay this decision.

8.32 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I will spend most of my speech discussing a cross-party letter that myself and 21 other MPs from Greater Manchester wrote to the Secretary of State last week in support of Heathrow expansion, and also asking the Government to renew and restate their energy and focus on delivering the vision of a northern powerhouse transport strategy that is fit for purpose. Before I do so, however, I will say a couple of things about Heathrow itself.

I am for national infrastructure projects. I think that they boost jobs and growth—in this case, high-quality jobs—directly and indirectly. The economic benefits of a hub airport in London are unquestionable, which is why trade unions such as Unite and the GMB are in favour. We must also remember that that capacity would go elsewhere if it was not at Heathrow. Obviously, there are concerns—environmental, noise and air quality concerns in particular—and they need to be addressed throughout the process.

I see today’s decision as a gateway decision, not a final decision, but if we are in favour of major infrastructure projects, as I am, we also have to be in favour of taking the difficult and tough decisions to make them a reality. There are always reasons to oppose things, which is why we have seen such delay and dithering in relation to Heathrow over many years. I totally understand and respect the issues that local Members of Parliament have, and they have done themselves a great deal of justice in putting them forward.

I want to turn now to the issues relating to the north. Let us be honest: over the past few weeks, the optics of transport infrastructure in the north have been terrible, with “Northern Fail” and all the problems that have arisen from that. Unfortunately, this has given the impression that the northern powerhouse ambitions are second-order priority for this Government, and that there is always something more important to focus on. That was why we came together as a cross-party group of MPs to ask the Government to now give the same energy and focus that they have given to Heathrow expansion over the past few years to truly realising the northern powerhouse vision. It is a great vision. If we can get the agglomerative effect of connecting all our great cities with our fantastic airports in the north, including Manchester airport, we can really rebalance the economy for good.

Manchester airport has come up a few times in the debate. We want the Government to recognise the fact that it is not like any other regional airport. It is the second best connected airport in the country. It serves many direct routes, including trade and business routes to China, Africa and many other places, and we want a bespoke strategy for Manchester airport that acknowledges that. In particular, that strategy needs to focus on the HS2 stop and on connecting northern powerhouse rail to Manchester airport. We want the same deal that other airports have had in relation to who is going to fund that HS2 stop. We are being asked to fund it, but we do not think that that is fair. Birmingham is getting its stop funded by the Government, and connections to Heathrow and Gatwick have been funded by the Government through many years of rail investment. We want the same. We will support this decision tonight, on the basis not of the hub being connected to Manchester airport, but of the benefits to the country as a whole, but we now want the northern powerhouse vision to be realised.

8.36 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Let me spend the first couple of minutes of my speech addressing some of the issues that have been raised this evening. We have had the 2009 vote thrown back at us—that was when my party voted against Heathrow—but since 2009, the arguments have been about the Airports Commission report. In 2009, I personally would have supported an airport in the estuary, and there are still common-sense arguments in favour of that, particularly in relation to the environment. An environmental trade-off between people and wildlife would have to be made. It is still the...
case, however, that we asked the Airports Commission to look at all the issues, and it came up with a clear conclusion.

I want to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). There is a serious cost to not making a decision. We have been friggling around with this for 50 years, one way and another, but we finally have to grasp the nettle and make a decision.

I also want to address the points about hubs made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands). His argument is addressed by the relative success of Incheon airport in Korea, which has taken the cluster of airports around Tokyo to the cleaners, economically, as has Chicago when compared with New York, which has three separate airports around the city. The economic lessons about the success of hub airports are there to be learned.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made several points about Gatwick, and I want to address them as the chair of the Gatwick Co-ordination Group, which brings together colleagues in this House, councillors from the affected local authorities, and representatives from the voluntary and charitable sectors with a key interest in the decision. We submitted our own response to the Airports Commission. The House needs to understand that there are two total showstoppers as far as Gatwick is concerned. One of the masterstrokes in my campaign was to drive the then Transport Secretary in a straight line from central London to Redhill, which is just over halfway to Gatwick. It is a distance of 30 km, and it took us two and a half hours using the main arterial route to Gatwick from central London.

Gatwick hangs off one rail access route: the Brighton main line, the busiest commuter line in the country. Those of us whose constituents are served by and use that line have all experienced the agony it has caused over the past four years. If there were a proposal for additional rail access to Gatwick, it would at least have some credibility, but Heathrow will have five new rail accesses to serve the extra runway. There is simply no comparison, not least given the obvious point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South that Gatwick is the wrong side of London for the vast majority of the country.

The final point I want to make in the very limited time available is about the workforce. When we submitted evidence to the commission in 2015, we totalled up all the people who were unemployed and claiming benefit in a vast area centred on Gatwick who could try to service the estimated 122,000 primary and secondary jobs that would come from expansion at Gatwick. Today that number is under 20,000. If we want to add to the massive housebuilding demand in areas of the south-east that we cannot even meet now, that would be one way of doing it.

8.40 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Today’s decision is about much more than airport capacity in London. This is a major national infrastructure project that can affect every region of our country, and it is on behalf of my own region of Teesside that I speak in favour of Heathrow expansion.

I pay tribute to Heathrow for its commitment to setting up logistics hubs, which will make sure that jobs and investment can be shared across the UK. Spreading the supply chain across the country in that way is a first for a national infrastructure project such as this and a key reason why I will vote in favour of expansion.

The South Tees Development Corporation site—a former steel site—in my constituency has been shortlisted to be one of those four hubs. I was pleased to welcome the Heathrow team to Teesside last month to show off the infrastructure and the local skills we have to offer. British Steel, with sites at Lackenby and Skinningrove on Teesside, also has aspirations to provide steel for the project, supporting jobs in our region. Heathrow expansion has the potential to give a boost to local economies such as the north-east. It is supported by the North East chamber of commerce, and additional flights are expected to generate £1.5 billion in additional economic growth.

After completion, a bigger Heathrow will be a driver for growth across our country, delivering new connections to open up Britain and links to the rest of the world. On Teesside we have investors from all over the world—from the US and Australia, to the middle east and Asia—who are looking for good transport connections when developing their projects. Heathrow expansion would deliver a boost not just for passenger flights, but for the movement of goods and services to both domestic and international markets. More than 550,000 international visits were made to the north-east in 2016, generating expenditure of more than £400 million.

It speaks volumes that more than 40 UK airports, including my own local airport, Durham Tees Valley, which states:

“We strongly support the expansion of capacity at Heathrow”, support the expansion and the new connections it will bring. Durham Tees Valley airport is currently cut off from the UK’s hub. Amsterdam and Aberdeen are virtually the only destinations it is possible to fly to directly from the airport, which has been named by Flybe in its route map for Heathrow expansion, and easyJet is also considering it for a future Heathrow route. That connection would be a big boost for our local economy and for businesses and holiday passengers alike, and the interest demonstrates the appetite for more domestic connections in our hub.

To ensure that our regions can benefit, I welcome Heathrow’s promise to support ring-fencing a proportion of slots for domestic flights and the commitment to reducing domestic passenger charges. Factors such as air passenger duty can be a drag on the affordability of domestic flights to regions such as mine, and that, along with the environmental commitments, is a commitment to which I and many other colleagues will hold both Heathrow and Ministers.

To conclude, for too long we as a country have been putting off this decision. Our national hub is at full capacity, and if we do not want to fall behind other countries we have to expand. Heathrow expansion is good for the British economy, good for jobs across the UK, and good for British Steel. Let us stop dithering and get this project off the ground.

8.43 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Of course I rise to defend my constituents, and I think everyone in this House would expect me to do so. Given the idea of
Windsor castle being triple glazed and of 7 million visitors to Windsor being overwhelmed by the noise of aircraft, I can do nothing but object to the proposal. It would require the demolition of hundreds of houses. The noise levels experienced across the entire Windsor constituency and in Bracknell Forest, Woking and everywhere else in the area are already dreadful and would get much worse. We know about the pollution levels and I am pretty sure that everyone present will have experienced the congestion on the M4. It is a very bad idea to expand Heathrow.

People would expect me, as the MP for Windsor, to say these things, and they would expect me to be a nimby but, frankly, with my background in business and my having studied economics, my major objection to the third runway at Heathrow is to do with the national interest and national economics.

I have to ask a few questions. First, why do we believe we will have more flights to the regions? I have been an MP for 13 years, and I know how easy it is just to read the briefings and go with the flow, but the Government's own data and analysis say that every single region of the United Kingdom will have fewer connections than they would have had if Heathrow were not expanded.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Adam Afriyie: I will not give way because of the time available.

Every single region, particularly the south-east, will have fewer flights. The second area where it is easy to have some fairly lazy thinking is the hub-and-spoke concept. The facts have clearly changed, and it is now about point-to-point travel. Nobody wants to get on an aircraft and then change to get somewhere else. Everybody wants to fly direct. The aircraft that are being purchased today by every single airline are point-to-point aircraft. Ninety-seven per cent. of all aircraft ordered are for point-to-point travel.

Aircraft can get from London to Sydney direct. Why are we showing our age? Why are we showing this lazy thinking, that we need a 20th century solution to a 21st century problem? I know it is difficult, because Heathrow has a huge amount of propaganda. Heathrow has a lot to gain. It paid £1 billion in dividends to shareholders while making only a £500 million profit. Of course it is in Heathrow’s interest to try to get this decision in its favour and to try to slow the process so it can continue to drive up landing fees.

Lastly, it upsets me as a Conservative to sit on these Benches and see us all nodding our heads and saying that we should go ahead and create the most expensive airport in the world at which to land. Why on earth would we commit to such a project?

Crispin Blunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. The way to make both Gatwick and Heathrow more expensive is simply to create no more slots by having no more capacity.

Adam Afriyie: Funnily enough, I have some sympathy with that view. I agree with my hon. Friend on having an offshore airport to address the country’s very long-term interests. An offshore airport slot would be a lot less expensive than a Heathrow slot. It costs just six quid per passenger to land at Gatwick, but it costs £24 per passenger to land at Heathrow. It is crazy to invest further in Heathrow to create a £34 per passenger cost for the airlines. That makes no sense whatsoever.

I cannot support this, and I hope that, in the coming months, as they begin to realise that Heathrow is pulling at least one on them, the Government will begin to back off. We will then all gradually begin to change our minds.

8.47 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The decision to expand Heathrow is complex and contested, with competing projections and a range of criteria that must be considered—more than I can do justice to within the four-minute time limit.

As we have heard, my party’s Front Bench remains unconvinced, with the four tests not being met. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Transport and his team for sparing their valuable time to discuss the issue with me in depth.

My good friend the Mayor of London and the No 3rd Runway coalition have put cogent arguments to me for why the third runway should not be built. Conversely, my local council, Slough Borough Council, has come out strongly in favour, as have the Trades Union Congress and unions such as Unite and the GMB, which represent thousands of local workers. I have listened very closely to their representations.

First, on climate change, we must bear traffic noise and air quality in mind. Yes, a new runway will mean more flights and more traffic, but what would be the impact on our environment if we do not build a new runway? The sad truth is that, if we do not build it, others will. New runways would be built in other parts of Europe, and the net result would be no different. The Government and Heathrow airport contend that they will have electric vehicle fleets and less noisy, less polluting aircraft, along with other mitigation efforts.

Secondly, expanding Heathrow will boost the national economy by tens of billions of pounds. In addition to creating apprenticeships, a new third runway will purportedly create more than 100,000 jobs across the UK, nearly doubling the size of the current workforce. Many of those jobs will be skilled jobs, jobs with prospects, unionised jobs, well-paid jobs.

Thirdly, there is the local economy and the benefits for Slough. The people of Slough sent me here to look after their interests, so of course I will be looking very closely at the impact of expansion. I am grateful to the many hundreds of residents who have shared their views with me. Heathrow is firmly in our backyard, given that the proposed runway will be built on Slough Borough Council land, and the people most directly affected by Heathrow airport must also be those who benefit the most. There must be fair compensation and clear benefits for local people.

I have argued with the aviation Minister, the chief executive of Heathrow airport and others that a greater share of the business rates must rightly come to Slough. The waste facility in Colnbrook would need to be rebuilt in Slough, along with a training and skills hub. More than 4,000 Slough residents rely on Heathrow for their living and a further 3,600 Slough people work in
related industries. The expansion of Heathrow will protect and boost those jobs, while helping to tackle youth unemployment in the surrounding areas.

Fourthly, on the UK’s transport infrastructure, let us not forget what this proposal means for thousands of people who will be able to use a new runway, as customers, to travel to destinations unknown to previous generations. As our Parliament deliberates on whether we build one new runway, it is worth reminding ourselves that India will be building 50 new airports and the Chinese will be building 136 new airports by 2025. When weighing all this evidence, and with the Slough people foremost in my mind, I will be voting in favour of expanding Heathrow when the House divides. I will do so without any sense of jubilation, nor am I handing Ministers a blank cheque. I will be keeping an eagle eye on how the Government implement this project. Ministers and Heathrow airport will rue the day they seek to renege on their promises in principle to the people of Slough.

In many ways, I vote in favour of expansion with a heavy heart. I am concerned about the environment and of course we must weigh up these various issues, including the uprooting of people from their homes. However, we are faced with a binary decision to make at this stage, without all the requested clarifications and answers, including on flight paths, the six and a half-hour night flights. More steps can be taken on noise, and so the Secretary of State has been clear about night flights, about how noise can be controlled and about how surface noise can be dealt with.

Before I come to the exciting culmination of this thrilling address, it is worth saying that one or two valid points were made by Members on the Opposition Benches. We do need to look more closely at how people get to and from the airport, as we have been too blasé in our assumptions about those kinds of issues and their effect on noise, disruption, congestion and so on.

Finally, this debate is about 40,000 more jobs, 5,000 more apprenticeships and a £44 billion economic benefit to our capital city. In the end, it is about a huge economic boost to our capital and to our country. It is right that we take account of the environmental considerations, and we must take them seriously, but the economic case is one that is made.
and has a rail station that serves 5 million passengers a year. Those runways have the potential to bring 55 million people into that northern hub and, as the Secretary of State knows, the airport is investing £1 billion in a transformation programme. Only 1.6% of passengers who use Manchester airport use Heathrow.

We have been let down by the “northern fail”. Public transport penetration and journey times are key to Manchester airport’s growth, but the journey to Leeds takes 16 minutes longer on the new timetable. We have no agreement about how the HS2 station is going to be paid for, about the east-west alignment at Piccadilly station or about the extension of the Metrolink to the terminal 2 building. We are still awaiting a lot of promises.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): That is exactly why this northern MP, who was born in Manchester and worked at Manchester airport, will be standing up for the north and voting against the motion.

Mike Kane: I respect my hon. Friend’s position. It is horrible when City and United fans fall out, but when people born in Wythenshawe fall out, the gods weep.

Heathrow and Gatwick have benefited from huge subsidies, including £15 billion for Crossrail and £500 million of public funds for western rail access. Manchester airport could meet 75% of long-haul needs for the whole country. I was astonished to hear SNP Members, who would not let me intervene, talk about Heathrow being vital to Scotland when they want independence. If they wanted vitality for Scottish airports, they would use their power over airport passenger duty, which would lead to an increase in passengers in Scotland, but they again bottled implementing that devolved power just earlier this month.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) that point-to-point is the model for the future in London. At the moment, we have a cartel situation. People from Manchester airport fly across the world and when they land they see BA aeroplanes, but we cannot get those same BA aircraft from Manchester to anywhere else in the world. BA should be done under the Trades Description Act; it should be renamed “Heathrow Airways”, and it should be done pretty quickly. The Secretary of State has given northern stakeholders few assurances that there is an integrated plan for the north of England. I will be supporting the motion this evening, but we will be holding the Government’s feet to the fire about a bespoke plan for the northern economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches will now have to apply.

9 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): With no availability at its main hub airport, London is beginning to find that new routes to important long-haul destinations are set up elsewhere in Europe, rather than in the UK. Other UK airports are increasingly squeezed out by Heathrow, with passengers from the nations and regions obliged to transfer through other European airports. That is the hub—literally—of this debate.

Although I respect my hon. Friends who oppose the proposal for Heathrow airport for constituency reasons, I respectfully say that they are wrong. The future is of hub airports. We can look, for example, at Dubai, South Korea and Bangkok. All the airports where there is major expansion are hub airports. My hon. Friends suggest that we should spread the service across five London airports. All that will mean is spreading the misery across far more communities in London.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) put his finger on it when he said that if we do not adapt to what the world is facing, we will simply outsource air travel and pollution to other countries in Europe, and that really would not be very sensible. Of course, my hon. Friends want the greatest protections they can possibly have against the environmental damage and noise aspects of the airport, and I support them wholly in that.

Let me make my final point in the very short time that I have available. In paragraph 2.32 of the Airports Commission report, it says:

“Another important trend is that of rising inbound travel into Europe from emerging market economies. IATA’s forecasts…predict that over the next two decades the growth of the origin and destination (OD) market in China alone is predicted to be greater than that in the US, UK and Germany combined”.

If this country wants to succeed in a competitive world, it has to expand its airport at Heathrow. I am chairman of the all-party trade and investment group. I can see only too clearly what will happen if we do not remain competitive. Hong Kong started its consultation on this matter in 2011. Within the next five years, it will have completed a hugely difficult airport policy into the sea around Hong Kong. We must remain competitive. The world is changing around us.

9.3 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. Heathrow plays an essential role in our national economy. My constituency is located on the gateway from Heathrow to London, with Heathrow being a powerful global symbol of our internationalism and our diversity.

I have been sceptical in the past about expansion, and indeed campaigned against the last proposed third runway. Today, on balance, based on jobs for the next generation and on what we need for our economy, I will not be voting against the motion, but let me be clear that much more reassurance is needed from Heathrow and the Government to ensure that any application does not fail to a legal challenge and that they can deliver for the country and local communities.

A majority in my constituency is in favour of expansion—every poll in recent years has shown that, and it is generally in the ballpark of 2:1. Tens of thousands of my constituents work, or have worked, at the airport. London’s first airport was in my constituency, in what is now Hanworth Air Park.

For many of my constituents, Heathrow is more than just a global hub for transport and shipping. It is the place where the world comes together—not only flying the planes, running the air traffic control and policing the UK border, but driving the trains and buses, cooking the meals for passengers and, in logistics,
delivering British goods to destinations all over the country and the world. They have developed a diverse set of skills to serve the needs of the aviation industry. Heathrow depends on them and they depend on Heathrow. But residents are conflicted because they want Heathrow to grow, but they also want a fair deal. It is vital that they have a fair deal.

Families have told me that they support expansion but that they have felt neglected when it comes to noise compensation. Residents wake up before 5 am if planes come in to land too early and they are unable to open their windows in the summer for the noise, including noise from hangars behind their homes. They also face traffic congestion to and from Heathrow, pollution from cars stuck in traffic and night flights. Respite and other protections are critical for their quality of life.

I campaigned alongside Hounslow councillors for Heathrow to reach out and do much better with regard to these issues, regardless of a third runway. But in my discussions with residents in recent weeks, they have cited reasons for supporting the expansion, including jobs, apprenticeships, more opportunities, a fair deal for small businesses and improved local transport. Local unions have also come out in support and residents highlight international competitiveness.

Today it is a disgrace that we are unfortunately being asked to vote before we have all the information, including sight of new flight paths and analysis of how people will be affected. If the Government get support for the NPS tonight, it will be for them to hold true to their word that the development consent will not be given unless detailed proposals show how environmental impacts will be mitigated in line with legal obligations, and all other commitments adhered to.

9.6 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I rise to support the Heathrow expansion and the national policy statement on airports.

Connectivity to regional airports is absolutely vital to Scotland. Aberdeen International airport is in my Gordon constituency. Some 3.1 million passengers passed through Aberdeen in 2017. It is the busiest heliport in Europe, is vital to the oil and gas industry, which supports 300,000 jobs in the United Kingdom, and it serves half a million people in the north-east. Without Heathrow’s expansion, this will be undermined. That is why I am stunned that the SNP is voting against Scottish jobs.

Heathrow’s international success has admittedly squeezed out regional domestic routes since 1997. These have dropped from 62,000 to 40,000. Passenger numbers have dropped from 6.7 million to 4.8 million due to capacity restraint. How can the SNP not support Scottish jobs? Carol Benzie, the managing director of Aberdeen airport, joined 40 UK airport bosses supporting this strategic growth, which the Scottish Government did support until first thing this morning.

Heathrow is vital as a hub connecting the regions with the world and it is vital to Scotland’s tourism. Inverness is benefiting by £8 million due to the route from Heathrow. How can the SNP possibly block it? This is where the Union works at its best, with an airport of international significance serving the regions. That is why the SNP will not vote for it—because it has something to do with the Union.

The expansion of Heathrow will mean at least 100 additional Scottish flights a week. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) agreed that we do want more flights, but tonight he is rejecting those flights. Heathrow and the national policy statement on airports are vital to the nation and to Scotland. Conservative Members will vote for jobs tonight—and the SNP will vote against Scottish jobs.

9.8 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Five and a half years ago when I became an MP, I became a member of the Transport Committee. At that time, we were doing an inquiry into the three options for south-east airport expansion. I went into it completely open-minded, but at the end of the inquiry I was absolutely convinced that Heathrow was the only viable option. Five and a half years have passed, and I have seen this Government and the coalition pass the buck on making a decision on this important topic—whether there was a general election or a mayoral election coming up—so I am really glad that we are now having the vote.

However, the issue has been ignored and put on the back burner for 50 years. In 1968 the Roskill commission on south-east airport capacity was launched, and since then we have been on the continuum of not grasping the real opportunity to invest in our infrastructure. I contrast what we have done with what has happened with Hong Kong airport. The difference is that that airport is owned by the state and there is a very clear commitment and understanding that investing in a country’s infrastructure helps it to grow.

I recognise the difficult time that many MPs have had in making the decision on how to vote. I completely understand the role of constituency MPs in serving the views and opinions of their constituents. But I would ask everybody else for whom this is not a direct constituency issue to think of the national interest, and what will happen to our economy in 10, 20 or 50 years’ time if we do not invest.

I say this for a particular reason. During the Transport Committee inquiry, we had some of the big international airlines come and talk to us about what their preferred option was. They said, “Actually, this is not an issue for us any more because we plan 20 years ahead, minimum, and so we have already started to discount the UK as our hub.” I know that we are in a race against time, but I want us to be putting forward a really clear message that we will invest in the infrastructure and in the people of this country. I am therefore very proud to be voting for the Heathrow option.

9.11 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me in this important debate. I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion).

I am also very pleased that the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) is in his place, because he made a number of remarks about my position...
on Heathrow expansion. I have always supported Heathrow expansion—that must be said for the record. I find it extraordinary that he, who is supposed to be a bastion—a supporter—of workers’ interests should be turning his back on that and voting down a proposal that will boost jobs in the south-east, particularly in his constituency and mine, to the extent that this proposal does. It is not just me who is saying this—it is also a man called Len McCluskey, that great champion of capitalist interests and the cartels that the right hon. Gentleman talked about. That supporter of cartels would have us believe that Heathrow and the union he represents have shared interests in the expansion. He has said very categorically that it is a step in the right direction.

Heathrow expansion has been debated for 50 years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) lamented the fact that this debate would last for only four hours. That is completely wrong. We have been debating this issue for 20, 30, 40 years. The hon. Member for Rotherham mentioned the Roskill commission in 1968. I would suggest that that was before half the Members here, certainly those on the Conservative Benches, were even born. It is extraordinary that Britain, of all the advanced economies in the world, should be spending so much time and effort debating building, not an airport, but a single runway in the south-east, which has had no increase in capacity for 50 years. It is a shame, and I am embarrassed, that it has taken us this long, but I am also very grateful and pleased that we finally have a Secretary of State and a Government who have taken this step forward—who have actually had the gumption and the courage to address what is a serious national problem.

The House of Commons should take its head out of the sand, collectively, and look at what is happening outside in the world—look at Dubai and the other hubs that are expanding. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, we should look at Incheon airport in South Korea or O’Hare airport in Chicago. These are the rising powers in aviation. As we debate and dance around these pinheads, the rest of the world—look at Dubai and the other hubs that are expanding, and the courage to address what is a serious national problem.

The House of Commons should take its head out of the sand, collectively, and look at what is happening outside in the world—look at Dubai and the other hubs that are expanding. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, we should look at Incheon airport in South Korea or O’Hare airport in Chicago. These are the rising powers in aviation. As we debate and dance around these pinheads, the rest of the world—look at Dubai and the other hubs that are expanding, and we have to compete with that expansion. That is why I firmly recommend the Government’s position and will vote in the Aye Lobby tonight.

9.14 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thought it might be difficult to do justice to 30 years of my own and my constituents’ opposition to Heathrow expansion in three minutes, against a series of reckless, greedy and selfish operators of Heathrow airport, but actually I can simplify it down to three propositions. First, can we really go on debating this issue for 20, 30, 40 years, and my constituents’ opposition to Heathrow expansion? Secondly, are those alternatives better or worse than Heathrow? Thirdly, is it feasible and will it actually happen? To the last, I would say, whether we believe in it or not, that it simply will not.

We have heard in the debate the fact that thousands of homes will be demolished; that Heathrow has been exceeding pollution targets for 10 years already and there is no plan to get those levels down; that the effect on public transport will be to suck up all the spare capacity in London, for which we worked for decades; and that there are no plans to expand the M25 and the M4, which are already two of the most congested roads, because apparently there will not be any additional cars. We have heard about the issue of safety, with 700 additional planes going across London a day. We have also heard about safety within Heathrow and the tragic case of John Coles, who was killed at Heathrow airport, and it took an hour and eight minutes for an ambulance to arrive there.

We have heard that 9,500 people die prematurely in London every year because of air pollution; that 300,000 additional people will be severely affected by noise, with 3 million people affected in total; that 28% of everybody severely affected by aircraft noise in Europe will live around Heathrow; that the cost is 40% to 50% higher than other airports; that the gearing ratio is over 80%; that there will be a 24% suppression in the growth of regional airports; that there will be a £10 billion to £15 billion cost to public transport, which the public purse will have to pay; and that the net present value over 60 years is somewhere between plus £2.9 billion and minus £2.5 billion, which is a worse economic case than Gatwick. And if we take out transfer passengers, it is worse passenger growth than Gatwick.

Are we really going to fall for this? If the House does fall for this tonight, there is a well-organised and well-funded operation. My borough has set up a residents’ commission chaired by ex-senior civil servant Christina Smyth, and we, along with the Mayor of London and other boroughs, are funding legal action that will delay this until people’s eyes are opened. When the flight paths are revealed and when the economics fall apart, Heathrow will no longer have the support that we may see today. I resigned 10 years ago to fight this, so I hope we are not back here in 10 years’ time debating this, because it is a doomed project.

9.17 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I will be supporting this proposal tonight, but I must also make the case for our regional airports. The NPS suggests relatively little scope to redistribute demand away from the south-east region to heavily underutilised capacity elsewhere. I recognise fundamentally that despite all the scenarios considered by the Airports Commission to manage demand away from Heathrow, regular airline passengers will still want to fly internationally from Heathrow. Other markets such as freight and budget flights are already put off from Heathrow. As it says in paragraph 4.65 of the interim report, “the relatively high landing charges and congestion at Heathrow already render it largely unattractive for charter flights, dedicated freighters...business and general aviation.” It is important that the market demand for additional capacity at Heathrow is addressed. I recognise that long-term alternative locations do not satisfactorily offset that demand, but I think that more could be done to help reduce the pressure on Heathrow.

The scenarios in the interim report do not really look at the full potential for nudging demand towards our regional airports. It only seems to look at how many potential air passengers would instead use HS2, rather than how many Heathrow passengers might use HS2 or other rail projects as a means of accessing alternative airports. Both Birmingham and Manchester are planned to have direct connectivity to HS2, with a projected
journey time between London and Birmingham Interchange of 38 minutes, so it will be comparable to other airports serving this market.

I stress that we need to support Stoke-on-Trent with improved airport connectivity. While we are fortunate to have four international airports within an hour’s drive of the city, rail access to our regional airports is not good enough. We must use HS2 and other rail improvements to strengthen connectivity to our regional airports in cities such as Stoke-on-Trent.

Our ambitions for a global Britain mean that we need to be linked to a greater number of global destinations. This is important for both passengers and freight services. East Midlands airport, for example, is hugely important to the national economy for cargo flights, and is second only to Heathrow. A significant proportion of Stoke-on-Trent freight goes through East Midlands airport.

I recognise that benefits from Heathrow can come to other parts of the UK. I particularly welcome the proposal for construction hubs supplying Heathrow to be located around the country to spread the benefits from construction more widely. I, of course, hope that Stoke-on-Trent’s bid for a hub will be successful. Airports provide not only the wider economic benefits, but significant employment and local economic advantages for the communities surrounding them and right across the wider UK.

9.20 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Unlike the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who kept us waiting for four minutes—until the last sentence of his speech—to know whether he was going to support this project, may I say at the very start that I and my colleagues will be supporting the Government on this tonight? This is a project of national importance. It is one on which our economy depends, and that will help us in our pursuit of increased productivity, in our pursuit of being a global trading nation and in regenerating the regions. As someone from Northern Ireland, that is an important aspect of this particular project, because we rely on connectivity.

We have had Members telling us today that we can have regional airports or hubs in different regions all across the country, but the truth of the matter is that most regional airports are not in the centre of populations that can support all the international connections that are needed, and we therefore need an international hub. If we are going to have an international hub, we need to have local connections. Given that places are currently at a premium at Heathrow, the only way to get those connections, despite what the Scottish nationalists have argued, is to expand Heathrow. They cannot wish for more flights into Heathrow and say that they are ambivalent about whether it should be expanded. This is important to us for that reason.

Northern Ireland is of course an exporting part of the United Kingdom. High-value engineering exports and high-value food exports depend on having a good cargo infrastructure to enable us to send our goods across the world.

Sammy Wilson: That is what we are hoping for. In fact, one of our asks is for a guarantee from the Government that the 15% of additional places will be ring-fenced for regional airports so that there is such access. The other thing is that this is a national project, and different regions of the United Kingdom should therefore be able to have an input into the work generated from it. I am pleased by the discussions we have had between Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in my constituency and Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council in looking at the possibility of one of the hubs being located in Ballymena, which would of course provide jobs for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Many contradictory arguments have been made tonight. On the one hand, we have been told by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that these capitalists intend to squeeze every penny out of the United Kingdom. On the other hand, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) has told us that this project is so uneconomic that the Government are going to have to subsidise it. One of the two has to be wrong.

On the one hand, we have been told that this is going to wreck our climate change targets. For those who find that an important issue, the only answer is of course to reduce the number of passengers. However, nobody has suggested that; they have all suggested that we should have passengers flying from regional airports. Well, those passengers will still produce carbon dioxide, and they will still contribute overall. If they fly from Schiphol, they will still burn carbon to get to Schiphol and from there to wherever they are going. Either it affects climate change or it does not. In fact, the only honest person was the Member from the Green party, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who wants people to stop flying, but I do not believe that that is an alternative.

For these reasons, we will be supporting this motion and walking through the Lobby tonight.

9.24 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Behind the inquiry and report of the Transport Committee on the national policy statement on airports was our genuine desire to assist MPs when reaching their decision tonight. I have always been struck by the similarity of the NPS designation to the manner in which a local planning authority makes a local plan before developers promote site-specific applications for planning permission. Even if the NPS gains support this evening, Heathrow Airport Ltd will have to submit a development consent order for approval.

The Committee’s report included several recommendations that, in hindsight, would have been better addressed through the design process rather than the NPS. The Committee drew the following conclusions. We recommended that both Houses of Parliament allow the planning process to move to the next stage by approving the final NPS, provided that the concerns that we identified were addressed by the Government in the final NPS that it laid before Parliament. The issue is whether the 25 recommendations that the Committee made have been addressed. The Government maintained in their response to our report that they have largely done so, stating:

“The Government has welcomed and acted upon 24 of those recommendations, disagreeing with only one.”
Reviewing the Government response, the Committee Clerk found that the 24 recommendations were not to be found in the final NPS. I believe that the Government have taken note of our 24 recommendations, and taken action, but not necessarily within the NPS. In many cases, the Government do not believe that the outline planning NPS process is the right avenue for design-specific recommendations. They believe that the right place is in the development consent order or at a later juncture. As a result, the Government maintain that they have fully implemented or exceeded the action that we proposed; partially implemented the recommendation by updating the NPS or by publishing additional information; confirmed that proposals would be addressed later in the planning process; confirmed that action will be taken through other mechanisms or regulators; or agreed with the issue raised but disagreed that the NPS was the correct mechanism, believing that to be the development consent order process.

The Transport Committee has, in the last three parliamentary terms, been a supporter of Heathrow expansion rather than the alternatives. Our report supported expansion, provided that our concerns were addressed, and I believe that the Government have done so. This procedural difference in opinion is not going to stop me voting for Heathrow expansion this evening. Britain’s airport capacity is scheduled to run out by 2030. It was clear from our evidence sessions with neutral airlines that support all airports that we had to proceed, and that Heathrow was the only option on the table.

9.27 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Apparently the Foreign Secretary could not be with us today because he is in Afghanistan. He has got his Khyber pass—what a carry on! We are in a situation where other Members, however, have spoken honestly and passionately about their constituencies and their constituency concerns. That is partly why we are here as Members of Parliament, but we are also here, even if our constituents are put at a disadvantage, to think about our country’s national interests. The SNP seems to have taken the ball off the field, and Labour Front Benchers are telling me that their constituencies and their constituency concerns.

9.30 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I support the proposed expansion of Heathrow and will vote accordingly. I will do so not because I do not accept there are many real and heartfelt reasons why Members feel, as they have explained today, they cannot support it, but ultimately because I believe that, on balance, it is in the national interest that we progress as a country by building a third runway at Heathrow. Frankly, as someone who can remember these debates growing up in the ’80s, we need to get on with it.

There are two points I want to talk about. A number of Members have referred to emissions and carbon reduction targets, outlining that they do not think we will be able to achieve those targets. I think it was the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) who asked for a plan on carbon reduction targets. Plans from this place or from Whitehall will not allow us to meet our carbon reduction targets. Those targets will be achieved due to the innovations that are occurring at Boeing, Airbus, Embraer and so on. It is the planes on which we travel on our holidays this summer that will ensure, through the use of carbon fibre and biofuels, that we start to meet those targets. A Boeing 737 that took us on holiday in the 1980s produced 36% more emissions than the Boeing 737s that will take us on holiday right now. The next generation of Boeing 737s will be 20% more efficient still. That is exactly how we deal with the emissions problem.

Members have rightly talked about economics. When I took my economics class, economics 101 was about monopolies. We have a clear monopoly in Heathrow. A small number of operators have, for whatever historical reasons, got hold of a number of slots and are using them. Less than 0.5% of new slots—taking off or coming down—have been given to new operators in the past few years. The situation is also seen in the frankly extortionate cost of the secondary market in the trading of those slots. Scandinavian Airlines System sold two slots to American Airlines for £75 million just so that American Airlines could take off and land twice a day. An old airline, GB Airways, was sold in 2008 for £100 million. It had 15 aircraft, 36 destinations and hundreds of people. It also had five slots at Heathrow, which went for another £100 million. If that is not the epitome of a monopoly and a market that does not work, I do not know what is. It is for that reason, and for the national interest, that I support Heathrow expansion. I look forward to voting for the motion.

9.33 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party group on regional airports and the MP representing Newcastle International airport, I know that there are very passionate and strongly held views on all sides of the debate. Delivering for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) was absolutely right to point out the difficulties with that. There is one decision, and only one decision, that we should be taking today. We need national leadership. At last we have a recommendation from this Government, but why were nine years wasted under the coalition and the previous Conservative Government? Let us go and do it now.
aviation capacity is one of the most pressing infrastructure issues this country faces. It will be critical in shaping the UK’s economy, particularly given the very obvious challenges we will face with Brexit in the months, years and decades to come.

I have long made the case that where we build new airport capacity is not just an issue for London and the south-east, but a strategic, nationally important decision with implications for the whole UK, including the north-east. I firmly believe that expanding Heathrow, as set out in the national policy statement, is the right strategic decision for both the north-east and Britain as a whole. Indeed, Newcastle International airport, the single largest employer in my constituency, has also been very clear for the past decade that expanding Heathrow is the right decision for the north-east and that the decision needs to be taken now.

At present, the north-east benefits from up to six flights a day from Newcastle to London Heathrow, carrying half a million passengers a year, over 70% of whom use Heathrow as a hub to onward international destinations, many of which are long haul. It is clear, however, that without additional runway capacity at Heathrow, UK domestic routes such as those serving Newcastle will gradually be squeezed out as capacity is increasingly used by larger long-haul aircraft.

Indeed, Newcastle is already starting to see that pressure build, with the Heathrow-Newcastle route reducing from five flights a day in winter 2018-19. Many cities and regions in both the UK and overseas are seeking the Heathrow international hub link. The north-east needs to hold on to its well-established link, maintaining that frequency, because in the face of Brexit and all the challenges that will bring, particularly for an exporting region like ours, the north-east can ill afford to lose further access to what is already its biggest hub airport.

Of course, Newcastle airport’s position on Heathrow expansion is echoed by the North East England chamber of commerce, which represents 3,000 businesses of all sizes across my region. It supports Heathrow expansion not just because of the clear connectivity benefits, but because it is determined to ensure that a significant proportion of the thousands of good new jobs and apprenticeships created will come to our region.

Mr Simon Clarke: Teesside has put in a bid for a logistics hub. Does the hon. Lady agree that this kind of sharing of the benefits of Heathrow expansion shows why shadow Front Benchers have got themselves into a really ludicrous position?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree that we need to share in the advantages. Just one of the firms that could benefit is Hart Doors, a family-run firm in Westerhope in my constituency, which has already supplied Heathrow with its high-performance security shutters for terminal 5. It said:

“Hart Doors has developed new products as a direct result of Heathrow’s procurement ethos…a focus on quality has required Hart Doors to find innovative solutions to meet Heathrow’s specific needs. The knock-on impact has been the development of new products that have subsequently been supplied to over 40 airports across the world. But Heathrow is not just a customer. Hart Doors also benefits from Heathrow’s international routes bringing in customers from long-haul destinations, allowing sales into markets that otherwise would not have been possible. Because of this, Hart Doors firmly believes that if Heathrow falls behind then Britain falls behind.”

This is undoubtedly why Heathrow expansion is supported by not just business, but the TUC, and the Unite and GMB unions nationally. They want to ensure that the UK can remain a world leader in the aviation and aerospace sectors, which are industries that mean high-quality, unionised jobs.

I recognise the important concerns that are being raised about noise, air quality and the potential impact on our climate change commitments. I would not support the proposal if I was not going to hold the Government to account on the mitigation that has been promised, but I feel strongly that this national decision must be taken in the national interest today.

9.37 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I rise to support the motion and I will vote for this historic event. The decision is long overdue, and it is urgent that we now make it and move forward on increasing capacity at our international hub airport.

Aviation will be absolutely vital for the future prosperity of our nation. It is growing around the world. The only question is whether the UK will be part of that growth in the future, because if we do not increase capacity at our hub airport, we will miss out. We will not stop the growth in aviation; it will simply go to other airports around the world, to the detriment of our economy. That is why I believe that for the future of investment, trade and tourism in our nation, we should back the decision this evening and allow it to move on to the next stage of the process.

I am absolutely delighted that the Government have said that their absolute intention is that around 15% of the new slots at an expanded Heathrow will be available to regional airports. I was delighted that the Secretary of State came to Cornwall on Friday—

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con) rose—

Steve Double: I will not take an intervention because we are very short on time.

In visiting Newquay airport, the Secretary of State saw the enthusiasm for an expanded Heathrow and the potential of a Heathrow link for Cornwall. It would be such good news for our local economy. It would be good news for our trade exports if we could export our high-quality goods from Cornwall directly through Heathrow to other parts of the world. The development would also be good news for our tourism.

At the moment, for example, we have a Gatwick link, but more overseas tourists to Cornwall come from Germany than from anywhere else, and Heathrow has five times more connections to Germany than Gatwick. A direct connection from Cornwall to Heathrow would therefore open up Cornwall to significantly more German tourists. We can multiply that by all the connections around the world that Heathrow would offer. If the success of the PSO that supports our Gatwick connection could be transferred to Heathrow, it would be another boon for our local airport and economy. A Heathrow connection would put us on the map by raising the profile of our regional airport, bringing other operators in. I am delighted to support the motion tonight. It is right for our country, right for Cornwall and right for Newquay airport.
9.40 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The case for runway 3 is as bad as ever for my constituents, and now weak overall, as the economic case has not been made—and that is based on the Department for Transport’s latest figures. The proposal keeps coming back—16 years, I think, it has been—and I have been campaigning against it all that time. It keeps coming back not because of an unwillingness to make a decision, but because successive generations have realised that the arguments for expansion do not stack up. The generously funded Heathrow lobby keeps bringing the proposal back and will continue to do so until it gets the answer it wants. Meanwhile, we have not moved on to seriously address alternative solutions as part of a nationwide UK aviation strategy.

On noise and air quality, which are the issues affecting my constituents most of all, more than 300,000 people in our region of west London and the Thames valley will experience significantly worse noise than they do now. Most of them are not aware that they will be under the final approach path to the third runway. Those under the present approach paths to the existing two runways currently get eight hours respite; that will be cut to six hours and perhaps less. On night flights, the Secretary of State has suggested that the cap will be relaxed, despite promises. Runway 3 will bring 50% more passengers. Heathrow says that there will be no new traffic, but there is nothing in the NPS to justify that claim.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Lady has campaigned valiantly on this issue and deserves more than three minutes in which to make her case.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my neighbouring colleague.

There is nothing in the NPS to justify how Heathrow can get away with saying that there will be no new traffic despite 50% more passengers, a doubling of cargo, and additional flight servicing and staffing. It is absolutely impossible. As everybody acknowledges, all the proposed rail infrastructure is needed now to meet current traffic pressures. Our roads system has ground to a halt, and our air quality has already been in breach of EU limits for many years. The Government will continue to lose legal challenges as a result.

There is nothing in the NPS on the air pollution generated by aircraft, and there is nothing on climate change obligations that will satisfy the Committee on Climate Change, as we will no doubt hear on Thursday. All the additional passengers arising from expansion will be outward leisure passengers and transfer passengers. The increase will bring nothing to the economy and will take the tourist pound away from the UK’s beautiful tourist destinations. Heathrow expansion means more intense use of existing routes such as New York. It will restrict growth at non-south-east airports by 24%—those are not my figures but the Department’s—reduce domestic routes to Heathrow from the current eight to four or five, and mean 160,000 fewer international links from regional airports, thus making our regions less connected to the rest of the world than they are now, according to page 27 of the Transport Committee’s report.

The hub airport model has been superseded by a preference for direct point-to-point flights among passengers and businesses who would rather not change, and also by the new ultra long-haul planes. Unused capacity outside London could, without Heathrow expansion, mean a growth of 62% in flights and 96% in passengers. Without Government intervention, domestic slots from regional airports to Heathrow cannot be guaranteed. The Government appear to have written a blank cheque to Heathrow by signing an agreement with a clause reaffirming the company’s right to sue the Government if Ministers back out of the scheme—a clause not included in the agreement on the Heathrow hub or that with Gatwick. It is increasingly evident that the Government are supporting the most expensive, most complex and highest risk scheme. Heathrow should be better not bigger.

9.44 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Let me start by commending those who have spoken today. The issue of airport expansion has been around at least since 2008, and Members have been campaigning on both sides of the argument since long before then. I recognise that those on both sides have strong views, but I think we can all agree that the tone of today’s debate has been relatively comradely.

As we have made clear throughout this process, Labour recognises the need for airport expansion in the south-east, but our support was conditional on the meeting of our four tests. The draft NPS was published in October last year. In a Westminster Hall debate in January, I—along with other Members—highlighted a number of issues about which we were concerned. The Transport Committee scrutinised the draft NPS, and published an excellent report in March which made 25 recommendations to the Government. The Secretary of State claimed that he had acted on 24 of them, but the final NPS is largely unchanged.

The Government had the opportunity to listen to Members in the House and in the Transport Committee. They could and should have improved this document and given Members up-to-date, detailed information allowing them to make an informed decision about one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the country. Instead, Members are being asked to vote this through, and any concerns that they have will be dealt with by the Secretary of State at the development consent order stage. Given the Secretary of State’s disastrous handling of the railways, and given the Justice Committee’s recent comments on his reforms of the national probation service, I—and, I am sure, many other Members—will not have confidence in him to carry out that process. He should have listened to the Transport Committee and embedded its recommendations in the final NPS.

As I said earlier, our support for the NPS was always dependent on its meeting four tests. Throughout the process we made it clear that our final decision would be based on evidence, and, having looked at the evidence, we do not believe that the NPS has met our tests. The first warning sign is that the entire document contains only one mention of cost, which is shocking, given the £14 billion cost of the project. There is the big question of how the Government will keep landing charges flat in real terms. If they have to increase them, it is likely that the airlines will pass the cost on to consumers. The NPS does not guarantee that that will not happen. On surface access, the NPS provides no details of the costs that may fall on the taxpayer. There are also no details
about the proposed changes to the M25 or the new rail scheme, and how they will be funded. The Government could have addressed those issues if they had implemented the Transport Committee’s recommendations.

The UK has a legally binding commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Climate Change Act. However, the Government have failed to publish a strategy for UK emissions reductions in the NPS. Their new aviation strategy is not due to be published until 2019, so we will not know their plan for reducing emissions until next year. The Transport Committee asked the Government to amend their outdated air quality population figures and adopt a more stringent air quality compliance interpretation, but again the Government did nothing. It is also telling that tonight’s vote has been scheduled before the publication of a Government report warning that surging aviation emissions would destroy Britain’s greenhouse gas reduction targets. Not only are Members being asked to vote for the NPS when it includes out-of-date figures and presents no clear strategy on how climate change targets will be met; they have also been denied the opportunity to see a report that will provide key facts about the impact of aviation emissions.

The Government have failed to address noise and environmental concerns. They have not updated the 2013 baseline figure, or defined an acceptable noise level target. Noise level targets for noise mitigation was another Transport Committee recommendation that the Government chose to ignore, as was extending the respite period at night to seven hours. The Government have failed to give any detail on how they will secure slots for the regions. Given that the slots are owned by airlines and not the airport, it is unclear how the Government can guarantee the slots will be used for domestic routes. The Government have said that the public service obligation will ensure domestic connectivity; however, they have not said how, and given that they would make domestic routes exempt from air passenger duty, one wonders how this tax cut would be funded. Given the lack of detail on how the surface access plan will be funded, we are concerned this will lead to more transport investment being taken from the regions, and specifically the north of England, and used up in the south-east instead. We are not convinced that the third runway scheme will bring benefits across the country so it has failed our fourth test.

We have been clear from the beginning of this process that our support was dependent on our four tests and our decision would be based on the evidence. The NPS has failed our tests, and therefore I will be voting against the motion today.

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): This has been a generally well-tempered and constructive debate on a very important topic; indeed, it is a topic of such importance that no Government have been able to solve it for the previous 50 years, and it is therefore with great pride and delight that I put this question to the House today.

We have heard a very wide range of views and there has been great engagement, but the fact remains that the need for additional capacity in the south-east is more pressing than ever, and, as colleagues across the House have mentioned, there is a cost to doing nothing—an opportunity cost that we cannot ignore that forces us to act. We have acted so far by calling a review, and series of consultations, a statement, an urgent question, a debate, and I myself have signed 75 or so parliamentary questions; we have had a very extensive wider debate about this topic, and rightly so.

I have been very surprised, however, by the attitude of some of the Opposition Front-Bench teams. The spokesman for the SNP declared that his own Scottish chambers of commerce were in support and that he himself and the Scottish Government had spoken in favour of this proposal, yet they now find themselves against it, and at a time when airports in Inverness, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and the like all stand to benefit. [Interruption.] There were many speeches in this debate and they deserve to be paid attention to. The SNP position, however, is clarity itself compared with that of the Labour Front Bench, which has managed to pull together the astonishing combination of itself being against the motion, while ordering a free vote for its Members and recommending abstention, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) mentioned; I have seen sludge from the bottom of the Thames with more clarity than Labour’s position on this topic.

The fact remains that a new runway at Heathrow is the best strategic solution to this critical issue: it is well located, and it will provide the greatest connectivity by the introduction of new domestic routes and additional and frequent long-haul routes. The north-west runway scheme would deliver the greatest quantified benefits most quickly up until the 2070s. Crucially, this is not a scheme that will only benefit the south-east; its advantages will be felt across the entire United Kingdom, as we have heard from speeches from the entire United Kingdom during this debate.

The Government are committed to protecting and expanding these domestic routes, increasing them from eight to at least 14, and 15% of them will serve domestic flights to deliver even more opportunities for greater connectivity across the UK, benefiting passengers and businesses.1

Tom Tugendhat: Are there not two things that would help my hon. Friend’s position here: first, having the CAA and NATS taking overall control of airspace and, secondly, extending the Land Compensation Act 1973 to air routes?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. If I had heard all of it, I would be able to respond in some detail.

Alan Brown: The Minister has referenced some of the points that I have made. What he did not do, however, was to guarantee to protect the slots for Scottish airports.

Jesse Norman: After this much discussion and documentation, the idea that the Scottish National party can hide behind the lack of a formal guarantee is frankly an insult to the process and to this House. To abstain, as the Scottish National party is doing, and not to reach a decision, is to say that it will give up at least 100 additional flights per week. It will mean no more slots and no more economic growth for Scotland from this proposal. Frankly, that is a risible position.

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1.[Official Report, 10 July 2018, Vol. 644, c. 6MC.]
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) rose—

Jesse Norman: I am afraid that I must make progress and continue to respond to the points that have been raised.

We will further improve the excellent rail connections that already exist. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, those rail connections distinguish Heathrow from Gatwick. The Elizabeth line will connect the airport directly to central London. The planned western rail link will greatly improve access from Slough, Reading and beyond, and I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). The proposed southern rail access would directly connect the airport to south-west London and the South Western rail network. The interchange at Old Oak Common will allow easy access to the airport via HS2 from the midlands and the north. Of course, Heathrow will pay for any surface access works that are essential to the delivery of the airport expansion. That includes works on the M25, the A4 and the A3044. It will also pay its fair share of the cost of any new rail connections.

Labour has put four tests to the Government on this topic, covering growth across the UK, climate change, fair share of the cost of any new rail connections.

The NPS also sets out specific measures to address noise impacts, including the provision of more predictable periods of respite through a runway alternation programme, an expected six and a half hour scheduled night flight ban, and clear noise performance targets. The details of these measures will be developed through consultation with local communities and will become legally binding through the development consent process. This is a historic moment for this country. It is the moment when we call on the Government and all Members across the House to show leadership. Any failure to support this NPS will have detrimental effects across the whole country. I am delighted, therefore, to urge all Members to support the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 415, Noes 119.

Division No. 192

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Tellers for the Ayes:
Mike Freer and Wendy Morton

NOES

Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Hamilton, Fabian
Hands, rh Greg
Hardy, Emma
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hobhouse, Wera
Hopkins, Kelvin
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jones, Darren
Jones, Sarah
Keeley, Barbara
Kilien, Ged
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lee, Karen
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Nandy, Lisa
Oftord, Dr Matthew
Onasanya, Fiona
Osamor, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Piddock, Laura
Qureshi, Yasmin
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Walker, Thalma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Yasir, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Kate Hollern and Ruth George

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House approves the National Policy Statement on New runway capacity and infrastructure at airports in the South East of England, which was laid before this House on 5 June 2018.

Justine Greening: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Even though this was a monumentally important vote, the House has had less than four hours to debate it, and in practice there were just over three hours for Back Benchers to contribute. Given how important the vote was, is that acceptable?

Mr Speaker: The determination of time available is not a matter for the Chair. The right hon. Lady has expressed her own view in characteristically succinct terms, leaving us in no doubt as to her dissatisfaction. All I would say to her and to other Members, on whichever side of the argument, who feel similarly, is that I have a sense that there will be a great many more debates on this important matter, in which we will hear from the right hon. Lady and from others similarly aggrieved this evening. I hope that that is helpful to the right hon. Lady.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any indication from the Foreign Secretary whether he will be back in time for Foreign Office questions tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: Surprise, surprise, the right hon. Gentleman has not communicated with me today and I feel sure that he has other pressing matters on his agenda. I have received no notification that he will not be present and correct for Foreign Office questions, so I feel sure that he will be. I anticipate that the hon. Gentleman will look forward to those exchanges with eager anticipation and bated breath.

Business without Debate

ESTIMATES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145(3)),
That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 20 June:
(1) That a day not later than 5 August be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2018–19:
(a) Ministry of Justice and
(b) Department of Health and Social Care and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government;

...
(2) That a further day not later than 5 August be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2018–19:

(a) Department for Education, and
(b) Her Majesty’s Treasury, so far as it relates to spending decisions and their consequences for grants to the devolved institutions. — (Kelly Tolhurst.)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

HEALTHCARE AND ASSOCIATED PROFESSIONS

That the draft Nursing and Midwifery (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 17 May, be approved. — (Kelly Tolhurst.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITIONS

Backing Our Servicemen and Women

10.18 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I believe that the Government’s first duty is to keep us safe from those who would do us harm, whether here or abroad. Our fantastic servicemen and women sign up to do just that—to look after us—and in turn we ought to look after them. It therefore brings me no pleasure to present to the House this petition, which hundreds of people have signed, online and offline, in just one month. Those who have served our country are facing spurious and vexatious allegations. It must stop.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of Hampshire and the wider United Kingdom,

Sheweth,

That urgent action must be taken by HM Government to protect British Military veterans from spurious and vexatious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to immediately legislate for a Statute of Limitations that will prevent British Military veterans of the conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and other overseas combat operations suffering spurious and vexatious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

Protection for British Service Personnel

10.20 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Those who have protected us deserve in turn to be protected, to live their lives in peace with the full knowledge of their country’s gratitude, and to know that they will not be pursued in old age, and not be the subject of repeated prosecutions over events that occurred many years ago. This petition is signed by hundreds of the residents of West Oxfordshire. The first duty of any Government is to protect their people, but those who actually do the protecting must be assured of a peaceful retirement.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of West Oxfordshire,

Declares that urgent action must be taken by the Government to protect British Military veterans from spurious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Government to immediately legislate for the Statute of Limitations that will prevent British Military veterans of the conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and other overseas combat operations suffering spurious and vexatious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002158]

Camelford Bypass

10.21 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Over the past four years of knocking on doors in the Camelford area, the No. 1 issue that residents have raised with me is the need for a bypass. The A39 is a very busy road, running down the spine of North Cornwall, connecting some of my busiest towns, with thousands of lorries passing along it every day. Because of the layout of the town centre, the A39 acts as a narrow funnel running through it, with queues of cars, lorries and tractors. This causes lots of pollution, lots of noise and lots of disruption to my local residents. Cornwall Council has had to introduce the only air quality zone in Cornwall to take care of the matter. A bypass is essential not only for air quality and public health, but for the economy. It will allow traffic to navigate the area much faster and the town to be much more attractive to businesses that want to invest. It will also unlock land for potential economic development and housing, progress for which is currently hindered by the congestion on the A39. I am therefore very pleased to be presenting this petition today on behalf of 743 residents as well as of the wider community in Camelford who want something to be done to address the public health concerns and to boost our economy.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of North Cornwall,

Declares that the request for a bypass for Camelford be accepted; further that an options report has been undertaken, which looks at different ways of addressing the congestion and air quality; further that a bypass is thought to be the best long term solution to the issues which locals are concerned about; and further the economic benefits that a bypass will bring to Camelford and North Cornwall. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the earliest opportunity for a bypass for Camelford to help ease pollution and congestion.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002157]
Veterans and Soldiers: Statute of Limitations

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

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), I remind those speaking, or hoping to intervene in the debate, that, in line with the sub judice resolution agreed by the House, no reference may be made to cases that are active before the courts.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I rise to call for legislation to bring forward a statute of limitations to protect soldiers and veterans, in the knowledge that today is the first day of Armed Forces Week. This is a week in which we have an opportunity to celebrate the contribution that our armed forces make to all aspects of our society and our national security, but also to express our collective gratitude to the armed services. This gratitude is universally felt throughout our society, and I know that it is strongly felt in this Chamber. It is for that reason that, when we see instances of soldiers and veterans being mistreated by legal process, we cannot help feeling—as they do—a strong sense of betrayal.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Speaking as someone who spent three years on operations in Northern Ireland, and on behalf of the men and women who served there, may I just say that it is about time that our Government sorted this matter out?

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. More than anyone else in this Chamber, he knows what it means to serve. Like my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Witney (Robert Courts), I have brought forward a public petition calling for a statute of limitations, and I have been amazed by the response. Hundreds of my constituents and members of the general public have signed the petition on a daily basis.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. and gallant Gentleman on the public support he has received in his constituency and on the turnout here this evening, which is testament to the strength of feeling in this Parliament, across the Chamber and across colleagues. I commend him for his work and support him in his efforts. The Democratic Unionist party supports him and we will work together to bring this forward.

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. When we see instances such as Dennis Hutchings—a man in his late 70s who served in Northern Ireland in the 1970s—being rearrested for an allegation for which he has previously been cleared of any wrongdoing on two separate occasions, we can see that there is clearly no public interest and that this is palpably politically motivated. The distressing point is that this situation is not just a few old men and a few last cases; there are a further 278 cases similar to that of Dennis Hutchings on the books of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Like others, I served in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, and I know of many cases that could possibly be dragged forward and people who are waiting for that knock on the door. It is invidious. I did not go there because I wanted to. Like my colleagues, I went there because we were ordered to; we were there to protect the civilians from all the terrorism. Does he not think that this is poor reward for the hard work and dedication of the armed forces?

Leo Docherty: I agree entirely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Belfast agreement released men and women from prison—from the possibility of prison—into political life. It was straightforward for them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it should be straightforward for our armed forces, who were not terrorists but were following orders just as our soldiers still do throughout the globe? Any soldier with clean hands certainly deserves protection. Those terrorists with blood on their hands got a fresh start in life and appear to be attempting to call the shots.

Leo Docherty: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. This is broader than only Northern Ireland. The House will be aware of the scandalous saga of legal pursuit in recent years of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, 3,500 cases were brought before the Iraq Historic Allegations Team at a cost of £60 million to the taxpayer, resulting in no prosecutions. All those allegations were spurious. A case in point is the experience of Major Bob Campbell, who now faces his eighth investigation, despite having been cleared of any wrongdoing on numerous occasions.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that this is a matter not just for veterans, for whom we rightly have concern, but for our armed forces of today and in the future? The impact that this could have, and is having, on recruitment and retention is palpable, as we know from those we know who are serving.

Leo Docherty: Absolutely. This is not a matter of history: it is a matter of the here and now and of future deployments.

I have two simple proposals. The first is that the Ministry of Defence legislate for a statute of limitations, perhaps for 10 years, meaning that after 10 years, unless there is significant new evidence, no case can be brought against a veteran or soldier. Soldiers and veterans do not wish or seek to be above the law—they just seek natural justice. We must allow veterans to get on with their lives without the constant fear of that knock on the door and legal pursuit.

My second proposal is that we return our armed forces to the legal jurisdiction of the law of armed conflict and the Geneva convention. The intrusion of the European convention on human rights, which was taken into British domestic law in the form of the Human Rights Act 1998, set the scene for the legal scandal that was IHAT in the case of Iraq, and Op Northmoor in the case of Afghanistan. Although the Government should be commended for the way that they closed IHAT,
hundreds of cases of a similar nature remain outstanding, with private law firms, that may be brought in the near future. HAT will happen again unless we in this place change the legal jurisdiction of our armed forces.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this very important Adjournment debate. Does he agree that both the Vienna convention and the Geneva convention need the closest study and early reform because they are no longer up to date?

Leo Docherty: I do agree and I am very grateful for that intervention.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this debate. A previous British Government were able to find a legal mechanism to help a specific group of people called the on-the-runs, over 130 of them, who were all in different jurisdictions—the Republic of Ireland, Belgium and the United States—and got “get out of jail free” cards. Surely there must be some way in which Her Majesty’s Government can protect those who are there to serve our nation.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that intervention. I agree that the whole resolve of the Ministry of Defence and the legal capability of the Government must be brought to bear to find a legally viable route towards this, because it is, frankly, an issue of national security.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend. Friend and neighbour for securing this debate. Does he agree that ultimately there is a simple but important contract that must be honoured, which is that our servicemen and women, whether today or in years gone by, have served us and we should stand by them?

Leo Docherty: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right: it is a contract of trust and we must maintain that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this important debate. Having spent my young years in Northern Ireland, I remember how many times it was British armed forces who kept civilians safe. I am delighted to see so many Members here tonight. I do not want to turn this into a political issue, but is it not sad that half the Chamber is empty?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I both serve, has now agreed to look into this complex issue. If the Committee can find a way through this legal minefield, does my hon. Friend agree that Ministers—bearing in mind the manifesto commitment—would be morally obliged to take notice and act on it?

Leo Docherty: I commend my right hon. Friend for his knowledge of the subject and agree entirely with his point. We must show resolve, and the Ministry of Defence must deploy its whole effort to find a legally viable path to fulfil our collective manifesto pledge.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on the damaging impact that the issue has on the morale and trust of those who have served and continue to serve. I have had a lot of correspondence on this subject, as one would expect, because of the petition and this debate. I am alarmed by the number of conversations I have had that involve the use of the word “betrayal”, but what alarms me more is when senior non-commissioned officers and officers who have served dozens of years all around the world in the most intensive and brutal operational environments tell me, after a lifetime of service, that on no account will they let their children serve as they have done. That pains me deeply.

Fundamentally, this is a matter of trust. It is about the Government fulfilling their duty of care to their soldiers, and it is about us collectively repaying the trust our soldiers have in us.

10.38 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing the debate. That these issues were last debated just a month ago in Westminster Hall demonstrates Parliament’s commitment to supporting members of our armed forces, both serving and retired.
The idea of a statute of limitations has recently drawn support from many in this place. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) has published a ten-minute rule Bill to provide for exactly that. Having been in the Chamber on that Friday when his Bill was before the House, may I recognise and pay tribute to the quiet and dignified protest of so many veterans out on Parliament Square? It would be wrong not to acknowledge that. Equally, I say to my right hon. Friend that while on that occasion—unfortunately, due to parliamentary constraints—we were unable to reach his Bill, I understand exactly why he chose, for technical reasons, to withdraw it to ensure that we can have a debate on it in due course.

So that there is clarity about what is meant by a statute of limitations in this context, let me set out briefly the key features of my right hon. Friend’s Bill—the Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations) Bill. The Bill would introduce a 10-year cut-off point after which prosecutions of members of the armed forces for the offences of murder, manslaughter or culpable homicide could not be brought. The cut-off point, or limitation period, would apply in circumstances in which the person suspected of the offence had been, at the time it was allegedly committed, engaged in armed conflict or in peacekeeping overseas. It would also apply if the alleged offence took place in the UK, providing that a previous investigation into the events in question had already taken place.

This debate is also timely because, as we have heard, last week the Defence Committee announced a new inquiry into just these issues. It is worth highlighting, because they are key in this debate, the questions that the Committee is seeking to address:

“What are the reasons for investigations into former service personnel?...”

What difficulties do the UK’s international legal obligations pose for any attempt at protecting service personnel?

Can a Statute of Limitations, extended to all previous conflicts, be designed in such a way as to be consistent with these obligations?

What should be the cut-off date for the Statute of Limitations?”

These are very important questions. Aside from the question of whether a criminal limitation period is desirable in principle, those who support the idea must also engage with the complex practical reality of the legal framework within which our armed forces operate. That point was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

The Defence Committee heard evidence in its earlier inquiry that suggested that, in respect of Northern Ireland, any statute of limitations would need to apply to terrorist offences as well as to the armed forces if it were to be lawful under the European convention on human rights. The legal issues to be overcome by a more wide-ranging statute of limitations are more complex still. For example, what offences should be covered? How might it affect the possibility of investigations by the International Criminal Court? How might it be constructed in a way that is compatible with our obligations under the Geneva conventions and the ECHR? If it were to apply to service personnel operating in the UK, what activities would be covered? Should there be any exceptions to the limitation period, such as where new evidence becomes available after the cut-off point? I am really pleased that the Defence Committee will be looking at each of these issues—and more—in depth. The Government look forward to the Committee’s conclusions in due course, and I am confident that this will be a very valuable contribution to the debate.

The principal concerns that the idea of a statute of limitations seeks to address relate to historical investigations taking place in Northern Ireland, as well as to those in Iraq and Afghanistan. I would like to say something briefly about each of those issues. First, let me turn to Northern Ireland. It is only due to the courageous efforts of our security forces that we have the relative peace and stability that Northern Ireland enjoys today. This Government are sincere and unstinting in their gratitude to all those who served throughout the long years of the troubles, many hundreds of whom paid a very high price for doing so.

The Government understand the concerns that people have about the way in which the legacy matters are currently dealt with. Historical investigations in Northern Ireland currently include numerous inquests and investigations into the small minority of deaths attributable 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 right.

The Government propose that the institutions set out in the 2014 Stormont House agreement are the best way to ensure a fair, balanced and proportionate approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. That is why the Northern Ireland Office is consulting on the detail of how the Stormont House agreement institutions could be implemented. The institution most relevant to today’s debate is the Historical Investigations Unit. The HIU would be responsible for completing outstanding investigations into troubles-related deaths within five years. That would include about 700 deaths caused 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, and designed to secure the confidence of the public.

As we have heard, last year the Select Committee on Defence looked at Northern Ireland in particular and recommended the creation of a statute of limitations covering all troubles-related deaths involving the armed forces, alongside a non-criminal mechanism for ascertaining the facts surrounding those deaths. While the Committee’s report demonstrated that there was support for alternative ways of looking at the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, we must acknowledge—that is my understanding—that none of the Northern Ireland parties felt this was an approach that they could consider.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I am glad that the Minister has paid attention to the previous report that we produced on Northern Ireland. I was even more glad that the official response to that report said that the consultation would include a section of alternative approaches that would consider a statute of limitations and a truth recovery mechanism. Unfortunately—and it seems to have happened with the change of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—that policy has been dropped. My impression, having spoken to
ardent loyalists and ardent republicans, is that they are trapped by their rhetoric. They cannot say that they would go along with a statute of limitations, but in reality, if the Government took the lead, they would be able to live with it.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I will address that point if he will bear with me.

Because there are a range of opinions, as well as requesting contributions as to how the Stormont House institutions could be implemented, the Northern Ireland Office consultation includes an open question inviting wider views on alternative ways of addressing Northern Ireland’s past. That open question ensures that all those who believe in an alternative way forward will be given a full opportunity to express their views and put forward proposals. As I said in the Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, I hope that everyone who has contributed to the debate will find the time to respond to the consultation. I can reassure the House that the Government are committed to considering all contributions carefully before deciding next steps. In that consultation, it is in their response to the open question that hon. Members can express their views on the subject.

Given the time, I should like to move on briefly to Iraq, where the eye-watering number of allegations and the several forms of investigation have created the perception of a witch hunt against service personnel and veterans. While the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal’s decision to strike off Phil Shiner shows that many of these allegations were improperly sourced, and some media reports have suggested that many of the claims brought through Leigh Day may be exaggerated, we must not lose sight of the fact that some service personnel in Iraq acted improperly. The death of Baha Mousa, the severe ill-treatment of detainees at Camp Breadbasket, and a small number of other incidents cast a long shadow. It would be remiss of us not to treat all allegations seriously, and we should expect them to be investigated professionally, but no one wants to see prolonged or repeated investigations over many years into the same incident. The Iraq Historic Allegations Team closed on 30 June 2017. When it was established in 2010 it was conceived as a two-year investigation into about 100 allegations of ill-treatment of detainees, but subsequent court decisions here and in Strasbourg opened the floodgates to over 3,600 allegations of ill-treatment and unlawful killing. It was simply overwhelmed, and struggled to identify quickly the few serious allegations and to conclude those investigations promptly and effectively. The service police legacy investigations have fared much better, concluding 73% of their case load within the first nine months. The bulk of the SPLI’s work will be complete by the end of 2018.

On Afghanistan, the number of historical investigations arising from Afghanistan has been far lower. This is due partly to the much smaller number of claims brought by law firms, but also to the more proactive approach taken during operations. By establishing a detention oversight team, which interviewed detainees while in UK custody and following transfer into the Afghan criminal justice system, we were able to ensure that most allegations were identified and investigated at the time. As a result, the Royal Military Police’s Operation Northmoor has had a far smaller case load and has been able to progress its investigations more rapidly than the Iraq bodies. Operation Northmoor has completed over 90% of its investigations, and its case load will be substantially complete by the end of this year.

Today’s debate can have left nobody in any doubt as to the strength of feeling on this vital issue. Inevitably, it is enormously difficult to investigate historical events and to bring those investigations to a satisfactory outcome for the armed forces, for bereaved families or for wider society. I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot, and to all hon. Members who have attended tonight’s debate, for providing the House with the opportunity to debate this very important issue. I look forward very much to the Defence Committee’s inquiry, because I believe it will play a valuable part in helping to move this issue forward. Finally, I again encourage everyone to engage with the consultation in Northern Ireland. I reassure the House of the Government’s determination to try to find a way through this minefield and come to a satisfactory conclusion.

Question put and agreed to.

10.51 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

1. Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018
2. European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

United States: Human Rights and Diplomatic Relations

1. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of UK diplomatic relations with the US. [906035]

2. Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): If he will discuss the human rights record of the US with President Trump during his 2018 visit to the UK. [906038]

3. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): If he will discuss the human rights record of the US with President Trump during his 2018 visit to the UK. [906039]

4. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If he will discuss the human rights record of the US with President Trump during his 2018 visit to the UK. [906048]

5. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): If he will discuss the human rights record of the US with President Trump during his 2018 visit to the UK. [906054]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The friendship between the United Kingdom and the United States is exceptionally close. I speak to Secretary Pompeo regularly. Of course, that does not mean that when we differ from our friends and partners in the United States, we are afraid to speak out, as the Prime Minister did in the matter of the separation of young children from their parents.

Mr Sweeney: I must say that the Foreign Secretary is looking rather sprightly this morning after his overnight flight. I hope that the jet lag was not too severe.

When the Prime Minister was asked about Donald Trump’s policy of ripping toddlers from their mothers and holding them in cages, she would merely say that it was “wrong” and “not something that we agree with.”—[Official Report, 20 June 2018, Vol. 643, c. 325.]

May I ask the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of the British people, if he can do better than that, and describe the genuine outrage that we as a country felt about this obscene policy?

Boris Johnson: I think that when the Prime Minister spoke, she spoke for me and for everyone else in the House, and, indeed, for the nation—and the hon. Gentleman will have noticed that no sooner had she spoken than the President signed an executive order repealing the policy.

Chris Stephens: United Nations human rights experts say that Trump’s policy of detaining children “may amount to torture”. They say:

“Detention of children is punitive, severely hampers their development, and in some cases may amount to torture.”

In the light of that, does the Foreign Secretary believe that President Trump’s visit to the UK should go ahead?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the President has now repealed the policy, and I think it is still common ground on both sides of the House that it is important to welcome the Head of State and Government of our most important ally.

Drew Hendry: The Foreign Secretary should cancel this visit. We know that, as a self-confessed admirer of Donald Trump, he will not do so, but will he finally condemn the process of taking children away from their parents and putting them in cages? The language that we have heard so far does not condemn that action.

Boris Johnson: The Prime Minister condemned it, and she speaks for the Government and, indeed, for me. No sooner had she spoken than the President of the United States repealed the policy—thus demonstrating, I venture to suggest to the hon. Gentleman, the considerable and growing influence of the United Kingdom.

Neil Gray: I could forgive the Foreign Secretary for feeling a wee bit jaded this morning, but these children are still being kept in cages. This is a major issue. How can he sit there and agree that this visit should still go ahead next week?

Boris Johnson: The President of the United States is the Head of State of our most important and one of our oldest allies, and it is absolutely vital. I think it is common ground among many people in this country that we should extend the hand of friendship to the office of the President of the United States of America.

Peter Grant: Is it not time for the Government to question seriously whether the current President of the United States is a fit and proper person to be our greatest ally? This is someone who can only be described...
as a serial child abuser. Putting children into concentration camps is not acceptable. The President has not yet taken the children out of those camps: he is holding them hostage to force their parents to give up their claims to asylum, and he is also trying to abolish due process by having no courts and no judges to decide on them. How can this person be fit for a state visit?

Mr Speaker: Too long. Hopelessly long.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers that I have already given. The President of the United States has repealed the policy in question, and he remains the Head of State of our most important economic, military and security ally.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The President of the United States has called out the members of the United Nations Human Rights Council for what they are: a bunch of corrupt, nasty hypocrites. He has withdrawn from that council. Why do we not save $4 million a year by doing just the same?

Boris Johnson: Because we believe in human rights, and we believe that global Britain should stick up for human rights. Yes, I think the United States has a point when it disputes the validity of article 7—the perpetual reference to article 7—in the Human Rights Council’s proceedings. I can, however, tell my hon. Friend that only this week the United Kingdom secured a record number of positive votes for our motion on the vital importance of 12 years of quality education for every girl in the world.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I agree with the Foreign Secretary that sometimes being a friend of the United States means being a candid friend, but is it not the case that, when it comes to NATO, the OSCE and sharing intelligence information, the United States keeps Britain safe?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for a characteristically perceptive point. Yes, not only has the United States kept the UK safe, but in many ways it has kept the whole of our continent safe since the end of the second world war. That is a giant political fact that this House should recognise.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): President Trump states that EU tariffs are disproportionately higher against American goods than American tariffs on EU products. What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of those allegations?

Boris Johnson: The reality is that the US has more tariffs against EU products, but the EU’s tariffs are often significantly higher, particularly when it comes to motor vehicles. As the House will know, there is an EU tariff of 10% against US vehicles and a US tariff of 2.5% against EU vehicles.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The depth of our diplomatic relationship is shown by what we think not just about any current US President, but about its Congress, people and businesses. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that these links will serve us very well post-Brexit—not just in a trade sense, but in a security one?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. It is vital for the House to remember that, every day in America, 1 million people go to work in UK-owned firms, and every day in this country, 1 million people go to work in American-owned firms. There is no other commercial relationship like it. America attracts about a fifth of our exports already, and that proportion is growing.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Since the Government have chosen to appease rather than to confront the Trump Administration, what success has the Foreign Secretary had in persuading President Trump and his Administration to adopt the open, rules-based trading system on which the future of our country depends and that he is trying to destroy?

Boris Johnson: Obviously, we dispute the President’s tariffs, and we have made that point very bluntly. On the other hand, there is clearly a problem with the dumping of Chinese steel, and we need to work together on that. That is the point we have been making to the President at the G7, and we will continue to make it when he makes on his visit on 13 July.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that President Trump’s commitment to the defence of Europe is evidenced by the fact that, since he came to office, he has increased the funding for US forces present in Europe by 40%? If it were not for the Americans, who else would be picking up the bill for the defence of Europe?

Boris Johnson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, because it is absolutely true that the United States remains by far the biggest payer into NATO. I detect a sentiment in the House that we are constantly at variance with the Administration of Donald Trump, but I am afraid that that simply is not the case. We happen to agree with the US Administration that it was right to bomb the chemical weapons facilities of the Assad regime, which the Obama Administration did not do. We agree that it is right to reach out to North Korea and try to stop that regime acquiring nuclear weapons. By the way, we agree that it is right that other European nations should pay more for their defence, and we encourage the President in his views.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary is trying to give us some context for his comments. He also thinks that the President would do a better job of negotiating
Brexit than the Prime Minister. If the Foreign Secretary did not like President Trump’s policies and, say, described them as “crazy” and would not vote for them, does the Foreign Secretary think President Trump would say to him, “You’re fired”?"

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. Thankfully, President Trump’s writ does not run in this country. We run our own affairs, we make our points to the President of the United States, and we do so with vigour where we disagree. The Prime Minister and I disagree with what he has been doing over the separation of kids from their parents. It is right for the UK to speak out over that and we will.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I first sympathise with the Foreign Secretary that, due to his emergency duties abroad, he was unable to join last night’s fight against Heathrow expansion? Four years ago, the Foreign Secretary was asked what was the biggest lesson he had learned—[Interruption.] Four years ago, he was asked what was the biggest lesson he had learned from his supposed hero Winston Churchill. His answer was:

“Never give in, never give in, never give in.”

For some reason, Churchill did not add, “Unless you can catch a plane to Kabul.” The Foreign Secretary clearly has a new hero, and we know who he is—the clue is in the hair. He said on 6 June that he is “increasingly admiring” of Donald Trump. He has begun to tell us some of the reasons why, but could he help those of us who are yet to be convinced by telling us three things about the current President that he increasingly admires?

Boris Johnson: I hesitate to say it, but I have anticipated the right hon. Lady’s question. May I first sympathise with the Foreign Secretary, that, due to his emergency duties abroad, he was unable to join last night’s fight against Heathrow expansion? Four years ago, the Foreign Secretary was asked what was the biggest lesson he had learned—[Interruption.] Four years ago, he was asked what was the biggest lesson he had learned from his supposed hero Winston Churchill. His answer was:

“Never give in, never give in, never give in.”

For some reason, Churchill did not add, “Unless you can catch a plane to Kabul.” The Foreign Secretary clearly has a new hero, and we know who he is—the clue is in the hair. He said on 6 June that he is “increasingly admiring” of Donald Trump. He has begun to tell us some of the reasons why, but could he help those of us who are yet to be convinced by telling us three things about the current President that he increasingly admires?

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his attempt to answer that question, but even he surely knows in the depths of his soul that when we have a President such as Donald Trump’s Administration responded after the chemical weapons attacks by the Assad regime supported by the Russians. It is a good thing that the United States is trying, and trying very hard, to solve the problem of a nuclear-armed North Korea. I admire at least the President’s efforts in that respect. It is also a good thing that the President is encouraging our European friends and partners to spend more on their own defence. We will certainly assist in that effort.

Emily Thornberry (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister regularly raise these issues at the highest level with our friends in the United States?

Harriett Baldwin: I can assure my hon. Friend that regularly raise a t the highest level thr oughout our diplomatic network. We are aware that these conflicts are often

Emily Thornberry: I would like to answer but unfortunately I do not have any more time.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Foreign Secretary knows that the right hon. Lady has had her two questions, and therefore that it would not be legitimate to put a third on this occasion. There may be other occasions. We come now to Question 2 and we need to speed up.

Freedom of Worship (Commonwealth)

2. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the extent of freedom of worship in Commonwealth countries.

Harriett Baldwin: I can confirm that. Further to the very widely attended Westminster Hall debate last month, I can assure the hon. Lady that at all parts of our diplomatic network we raise these issues at the highest level.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Religious freedom in the Commonwealth is important, but Christian communities throughout the wider world suffer from persecution. Can the Minister give an absolute assurance that the Government will do everything possible to ensure that Christians and other religious groups have freedom of worship?

Harriett Baldwin: I can assure my hon. Friend that freedom of religion and belief is one of the topics we regularly raise at the highest level throughout our diplomatic network.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister ensure that she talks, via the Foreign Secretary, to President Buhari of Nigeria? With the dreadful goings on in that country and the increasing pressure on the Christian community in the north, it is about time that the President stood up and did something to protect it.

Harriett Baldwin: Specifically on the situation in Nigeria, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we regularly raise these issues at the highest level with our friends in Nigeria. We are aware that these conflicts are often
driven by conflict over land, grazing rights and water. They should not necessarily always be characterised by religious difference.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Sadly, around the world today we are seeing a rise in the level of persecution of Christians, particularly across the middle east. Will the Minister confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office remains committed to protecting and promoting religious freedom, particularly of Christians who are persecuted around the world?

Harriett Baldwin: I can certainly confirm that, but it is wider than that. We always seek to help in specific situations relating to all freedom of religion and belief, but we also raise the issue more widely in international forums such as the United Nations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the Commonwealth charter lists tolerance, respect and understanding as guiding principles, will the Minister outline what diplomatic pressure her Department will use to defend against persecution those who choose Christ in India, Nigeria and Malaysia?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s assiduous pursuit of this agenda. He mentions three specific countries. I can assure him that we regularly raise issues of freedom of religion and belief not just in those countries but more widely, and not only in Commonwealth countries but across the wider network.

Kurdistan and Iraq


Alistair Burt: Through ministerial and other engagements, we are urging the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish regional government to resolve differences on all immediate issues. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has pressed this message with Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi. The national elections in May were a pivotal moment. With Daesh defeated territorially in Iraq, the next challenge is winning the peace.

Robert Halfon: With the all-party group on Kurdistan, I recently visited Sulaimani University and Kurdistan University. Their students love Britain and want to study in Britain, yet are being held back by visa bureaucracy. Given that Kurdistan is in the frontline against ISIL and is a beacon of stability, can my right hon. Friend do more to unwind the bureaucracy so that more Kurdish students can study in our country?

Alistair Burt: The Government’s position is to say repeatedly that we want the brightest and best students to be able to come to the United Kingdom. Our policy in Irbil is to encourage exactly the same. I will look at the question my right hon. Friend raises, because we want to ensure that students in the Kurdish region, who I have also met, are able to come to the UK.

Bridget Phillipson: As Iraq attempts to move forward, what discussions has the Minister had with his Iraqi counterparts about respecting international human rights standards, especially with regards to the rights of women in Iraq?

Alistair Burt: It is a constant part of the conversation we have in Iraq and in other places to make sure that as the country moves forward, particularly after a relatively successful election process, all sections of the community are included in future. When we meet Iraqi parliamentarians, as well as Ministers, we stress that a country is not complete unless women are playing a foremost part both in ministerial and civic society life.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In what way is the demand for full freedom and self-determination among the Iraqi people, particularly the people of Kurdistan, illegitimate?

Alistair Burt: Questions of the constitutional structure of Iraq are not for the United Kingdom. There is regular dialogue between different sections of the community in Iraq about the proper constitutional processes and structures that will help all parts of the community to develop effectively and strongly. It is essential that the new Government recognise the needs of all sections of Iraqi society.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): More dialogue is vital and must be supported by the international community. What assessment has the Minister made of the influence of Russia in the negotiations between the Kurdish regional government and the Iraqi Government, given the significant investment by the Russian firm Rosneft in Kurdistan’s regional oil pipeline?

Alistair Burt: It is true to say that, in the formation of the new Iraqi Government, there are many interests from countries in the region. What is essential is that the new Iraqi Government demonstrate their independence and determination to run Iraq without external interference, and stand up for the needs of all their communities to make sure that the disaster that befell Iraq in the past, when other communities were not properly represented, does not happen again.

Nord Stream 2

6. Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What his policy is on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We recognise that Nord Stream 2 is a controversial proposal, as it would be a gas pipeline that would bypass Ukraine and give Russia greater dominance over the European energy market. The UK is not significantly affected, but we are none the less in regular contact with Germany and Ukraine to discuss and assess the situation.
Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do not like saying this, because the right hon. Gentleman is a good Minister, but for him to say that the UK is not affected displays a shocking level of languid complacency. Of course the UK will be affected if this goes ahead; it will hand to the Kremlin unimaginable economic and political leverage. Why will he not show some muscle, see that this is a big problem, not just for the UK but for the entirety of the future of Europe, and start rallying together with our allies to stop this project?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his appreciation of my skills as a former oil trader. Nord Stream is indeed a pipeline that takes gas from Russia to Germany through international waters, until Denmark, and then it makes landfall in northern Germany. It is primarily a matter for those countries but, as he says, it is of extreme strategic importance to Ukraine, which I fully recognise. That is why we have had meetings with the chief executive of NAFTA. It is also significant to note that, on 10 April, Chancellor Merkel stated that Nord Stream 2, as a project, “is not possible without clarity on the future transit role of Ukraine”.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement. He is more than aware from his many trips around Europe, and indeed his expert understanding of the energy business and the United States, of the potential impact on not only eastern Europe, but our forward defences because of that. Does he agree that together walking with allies around the Baltic, where this pipeline seems to be going to flow, would be very much in our national interest and that the UK very definitely has an interest in making sure that Russia does not complete this project?

Sir Alan Duncan: I reiterate that, in terms of our actual energy supplies, Russia accounts for only about 1% of UK gas demand, so it is very small and most of it comes from Qatar and elsewhere. However, this pipeline is potentially of strategic importance for the influence of Russia, as my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee rightly says, so of course we are in discussion with Germany and other interested parties about the significance of the proposed pipeline.

Israel and Palestine

7. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What representations he has made to his Israeli counterpart on the proposed demolition of Khan al-Ahmar village in the west bank. [906041]

16. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on prospects for the peace process in Israel and Palestine. [906050]

19. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What the policy of the Government is on a two-state solution in the middle east. [906053]

25. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What recent representations he has made to his Israeli counterpart on Israeli settlements in the west bank. [906059]
**Marsha De Cordova:** So far this year, the Israeli authorities have demolished 27 donor-funded structures in east Jerusalem and on the west bank. Can the Minister comment on whether any of these structures were funded by the UK?

**Alistair Burt:** I am not aware of any. The EU has made some claims for compensation in relation to structures, but not the UK. Again, the hon. Lady emphasises the problem in relation to settlements and structures. These are difficult issues in relation to the context of Israel and the occupied territories, and we believe this could be dealt with in a different way.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the recent attacks by Hamas from Gaza into Israel?

**Alistair Burt:** As always, we condemn any terrorist attack. Hamas’s policy on Israel is well known. We have no contact with Hamas and, until it moves on the Quartet principles, it is unlikely to play a serious part in the future of Gaza.

**Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP):** Regarding the prospects for peace, stability and good relations in the region generally, what discussions have there been with the American Administration about the forthcoming peace plan for the area, and what does the Minister make of those who would dismiss the plan even before it has got off the ground?

**Alistair Burt:** No one should dismiss any possibility for the peace plan. This is a first-term President who has expressed his determination through his envoys to bring something forward. There is concern that nothing has come forward yet, but it is a question of timing, and various parts of the plan have been spoken about with different entities. It is important, if it comes forward, that it be given every chance of success. The region and the world cannot wait forever for a resolution to this issue, and we would wish the prospects for a settlement well when the plan comes forward.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** If any colleague can produce a single-sentence question, it will maximise participation.

**Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the landmark visit today by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, the first member of the royal family to officially visit Israel? The visit underlines the deep bond of friendship between the two countries.

**Alistair Burt:** Yes indeed. The Government are delighted at the visit of His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge. It is an important opportunity for His Royal Highness to promote the strong relationships between the British, Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

**Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):** Does the Minister consider that Hamas organising a march of return to areas that have been part of Israel since 1948 is likely to move us any closer to a negotiated two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians?

**Alistair Burt:** The answer is probably not. Everyone knows that the right of return will be dealt with in the ultimate negotiations in relation to an agreement. There are legitimate reasons to protest in Gaza, and there is also illegitimate exploitation of those reasons.

**Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab):** It has been widely reported that the Foreign Secretary intends to convene an imminent summit with Jared Kushner and other interested parties to lay out the red lines that the Government will apply when evaluating the Trump Administration’s Israel-Palestine peace plan. Will the Minister of State tell the House in clear terms today what those red lines are?

**Alistair Burt:** No, I will not. There is plenty to do in relation to this without me setting out any red lines that may or may not be extant.

### Global Britain

**9. Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con):** What progress his Department has made on the global Britain agenda.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson):** Global Britain is about being open, outward-looking and engaged with the world so as to maximise our influence, and I give the House the clearest recent example of that: the 28 countries that joined us in sympathetically expelling 153 Russian spies.

**Mr Seely:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is the perfect opportunity for us to fundamentally rethink our foreign policy post-Brexit, and that more work could be done on the idea of global Britain to ensure that we have a foreign policy fit for the 21st century?

**Boris Johnson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why we have responded to the challenges that the world presents us with today by increasing our diplomatic staff by another 250 diplomats, in addition to the 100 that we added to our European strength, and we are opening 10 new sovereign posts in the Caribbean and the Pacific, with more to come in Africa.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** I hope that global Britain is also about being extremely robust where there are strategic issues in Europe that we have to address, such as Nord Stream 2. Will the Foreign Secretary make it absolutely clear that Russia has systematically been bullying smaller countries in Europe for years through its energy policy and that we will assist the Danes and the Germans if they want to make sure this does not go ahead?

**Boris Johnson:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Germans import a great deal of their gas from Russia and they are conflicted in that matter, but we continue to raise the concerns that he mentions with our German friends and of course with all the other states on the periphery of the EU that are threatened, as he says, by Russian gas politics.

**Several hon. Members rose—**
Mr Speaker: Order. Just a hint: global Britain can potentially have links with Australia and New Zealand if that is of interest to the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), who has a question that might otherwise not be reached.

18. [906052] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it most certainly is.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be aware that the Australia-United States free trade agreement was negotiated within 13 months. Can he outline what preparations his Department is making, so that when we leave the EU we can begin to negotiate speedy free trade arrangements with our Commonwealth counterparts? In the spirit of Commonwealth friendship, while he is on his feet, would he mind wishing the Socceroos every success in their game tonight?

Boris Johnson: I have just been warned by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific that the Socceroos are playing Peru tonight. I have just been to Peru and I would not want to forfeit any friendship I may have acquired on that mission. We wish both sides well in that encounter. Not just the FCO, but the Department for International Trade is waiting, straining in the slips—unlike the Labour party— to do the free trade deals that my hon. Friend rightly refers to.

Dan Jarvis (Barneys Central) (Lab): Given that yesterday the Foreign Secretary found himself in Afghanistan, may I ask what lessons he has learnt from Britain’s most recent intervention in Afghanistan and how he intends to employ those lessons in future?

Boris Johnson: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question because, as the House may know, the National Security Council is about to consider a substantial uplift in our engagement in Afghanistan? It is a timely moment to assess the worthwhile aspects of that offer. I believe the UK has contributed massively to modern Afghanistan. Life expectancy for males is up 10 years since the UK first went there as part of the NATO operation; female education—girls attending school—has gone from 3% to 47%; huge tracts of the country are now electrified that were not. We have much to be proud of in our engagement with Afghanistan.

Turkey

10. Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Turkey.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Following the re-election of President Erdoğan and the AKP party on Sunday, we look forward to continuing our close co-operation with Turkey. Turkey continues to face serious terrorist threats from the PKK and Daesh, and from the Syria conflict. We are a close partner of Turkey and we co-operate strongly on counter-terrorism in particular.

Chris Evans: In the light of President Erdoğan’s election at the weekend, what pressure can the Government bring to bear to ensure that human rights and the rule of law are upheld in that country?

Sir Alan Duncan: That is a perfectly valid question. This is something that we raise on every occasion that we meet Ministers from Turkey. The Prime Minister spoke to President Erdoğan last night, both to congratulate him but also to ensure that the findings of the OSCE office for democratic institutions and human rights report, which released its preliminary findings yesterday, are fully upheld.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): As a former journalist of many years standing, I feel a particular affinity for the hundreds of journalists who are jailed in Turkey and no doubt being brutally treated. Will the Government tell the House what they are doing to highlight the plight of those brave men and women?

Sir Alan Duncan: A fundamental principle of our foreign policy is to defend freedom of expression and media freedom in all the countries we have associations with. This is something that we raise on a regular basis with all our counterparts in Turkey.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has perambulated away from her normal position, but we are nevertheless delighted to see her.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) that thousands of journalists, as well as thousands of academics and other individuals, are being held without trial in jail in Turkey. Hundreds of thousands of people are being held without trial in prison there, including political leaders and members of Parliament. I ask the Foreign Office to be robust in its discussions with President Erdoğan on the safety of those people and their right to a fair trial.

Sir Alan Duncan: I can assure the right hon. Lady that one of the advantages of our close association with Turkey is that we can speak to it very directly and firmly, in a way that many of our counterparts cannot. We have called on Turkey on many occasions to end the state of emergency that has led to many of those arrests, and we very much hope that, following the clear result of the election, the state of emergency can be lifted.

Mr Speaker: I call Giles Watling.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Question 11, if you please, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon, but I think that Mr Mahmood wanted to come in from the Front Bench.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. We are all concerned about the impact of this result on the human rights of those journalists, political prisoners and academics who are being held in prison, and on press freedoms and the rule of law inside Turkey. The Minister has described our close connections with Turkey. As a first step, have the Government urged President Erdoğan to lift the state of emergency?
Sir Alan Duncan: As I have just said, we have. The answer again is yes, we would like President Erdoğan to lift the state of emergency. In the course of the elections, there were sort of commitments to do so, and we hope that those commitments can be fulfilled by lifting it as soon as possible.

Illegal Wildlife Trade

11. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. [906045]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We believe that the illegal wildlife trade is not only odious in itself but associated with many other forms of criminality. That is why we are hosting a global conference on tackling the illegal wildlife trade in London this October.

Giles Watling: According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, illegal wildlife trading is increasingly occurring on the internet. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what steps are being taken to counter this?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right on the money there, and indeed ahead of the curve. We see that risk, and that was why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office hosted a group of leading technology companies only a few weeks ago to develop new ways of combating the online trade in these specimens that he mentions.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary is right to say that this trade is odious, but what positive suggestions will the Government take to the conference in October? Are we going to let more species be wiped out before this trade is stopped?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government are among the world leaders in introducing an ivory ban. The Chinese have joined us and are bringing many others with them. We hope that the summit will be an opportunity for other nations to join that global ivory ban and, with partners, will be looking to strengthen not just the pull factors in China and other countries, but the authorities as they crack down on illegal trade in wildlife.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) seems to have a compendious knowledge of rare species, and we are very grateful to him.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): One of the very rarest and most threatened species in this country is the wildcat. It clings on in my constituency—just. Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will do everything to police this invidious and horrible crime in the most remote areas and work as closely as possible with the Scottish Government to stamp it out?

Boris Johnson: I am delighted to say that we will do everything in our power to stick up for the wildcat wherever it is found—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) seems to have a compendious knowledge of rare species, and we are very grateful to him.

Ocean Conservation

12. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What his policy is on global ocean conservation. [906046]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Last Friday, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced that he personally will lead on drawing up an international oceans strategy for the Government. Our ambitious Blue Belt programme is protecting waters around the overseas territories and we are championing the establishment of science-based marine protected areas across the Southern ocean, including in the Weddell sea.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Global ocean conservation must begin at home, so will the Minister join me in welcoming many local initiatives around the coastline of Britain, which are playing such a vital role—particularly, I am bound to say, around the beautiful coastline of North Devon?

Sir Alan Duncan: We all commend the efforts of local communities. Growing awareness and subsequent personal choices and actions are crucial for preserving the marine environment, and we all need to assess our own habits as consumers and play our part in safeguarding our oceans.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Effective marine conservation requires constricting fishing to sustainable levels, as in the successful cod recovery plan in the North sea. Will the Minister encourage his fellow Ministers to end the pretence that if Brexit happens British fishermen will suddenly be able to catch a lot more fish?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that is a slightly different point from the policy we are drawing up for the wider oceans around the world and around our overseas territories. The UK has declared large-scale marine protected areas around five overseas territories, leading to about 3 million square kilometres of protected ocean. That is a massive achievement, which we wish to build on in any way we can.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, CCAMLR, meets in October and will consider three new marine protected areas around Antarctica—particularly, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, the Weddell sea. However, it appears likely that, as happened in previous years, Russia and China in particular might well block those proposals. What further action can we take between now and October to bring real pressure to bear on Russia and China to bring in these MPAs, which are so vital for the preservation of our Antarctic wildlife?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it is fair to say that the UK is very much a world leader on oceans policy of this sort, and I hope that any kind of environmental standards that we wish to set in our oceans are not blocked for any political purposes by countries such as Russia. We are all on the same planet, we need to preserve our oceans, and I hope that our scientific lead in this area will also give us the political authority to reach the sort of agreements that we want to.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): President Trump’s recent statement on the oceans did not mention sustainability, stewardship, ecosystems or climate. When he comes to London, will the Government challenge him on that, or do they think that it would, to coin a phrase, achieve absolutely nothing? If it is the latter, what is the point of the visit?

Sir Alan Duncan: Should I meet President Trump personally, I will look upwards, look him in the eye, and the first word on my lips will be “oceans”.

Human Rights

13. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote and support human rights internationally.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which I know affects a number of constituents not just in the west midlands but across the country. I recognise that this has been an incredibly difficult and distressing time for Mr Johal and his family, whom I most recently met along with their very assiduous constituency MP, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), on 18 June.

We continue to raise Mr Johal’s case with the Indian Government at the highest level. I raised it with the Minister for External Affairs on 7 May in New Delhi, and Baroness Williams has also done so. The Prime Minister, very unusually, brought up this consular issue with Prime Minister Modi at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting on 18 April.

Mr Speaker: I think the constituency MP should have a chance to do so.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) for using his good offices to bring this matter, on which the Minister has been assiduous, to the Floor of the House.

The Foreign Secretary has met the hon. Member for Walsall North, whom I have emailed, to discuss this case, and it has been put online, for which I am very grateful because it keeps the case in the public domain.

When will the Foreign Secretary now bother to meet Jagtar Singh Johal’s constituency Member of Parliament to discuss this face to face?

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Yesterday’s protests in Tehran demonstrate increasing anger on human rights abuses and economic failure by the Iranian Government. Do this Government agree that we need change and reform in Iran to benefit the Iranian people?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She is very assiduous on the Iranian issue. Yes, we are obviously looking towards getting reform within that country. A huge amount of work goes on both in the Foreign Office, in relation to the global Britain agenda, and in that region. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for the Middle East spends a considerable amount of his time on this, and I am sure he will take it up.

24. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is almost two and a half years since the Cambridge student Giulio Regeni was brutally murdered in Cairo, and the truth has had to be extracted from the Egyptian authorities. Can the Minister tell us what pressure he is putting on colleagues to try to get the truth for Giulio?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I am glad he is in his place. He has worked incredibly hard on this. [Interruption.] My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary says from a sedentary position that he would be happy to meet him at the earliest convenient opportunity.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Yesterday the Foreign Office, rather pathetically, used the cover story of a trip to Africa to throw the media off the Foreign Secretary’s scent. Can I suggest to the Minister that his boss makes a real trip to Africa to focus urgently on the violence in western Cameroon, the instability gripping the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the danger that next month’s elections in Zimbabwe will not be free, fair or democratic?

Mark Field: May I point out that the Foreign Secretary has visited Africa on no fewer than nine occasions during the past year? Although I assume there will not be too many difficult votes to be dealt with during the course of the year ahead, I am sure he will have that sort of commitment. The hon. Lady rightly points out that, in places like Cameroon and the DRC, we are highly respected as a Government and will continue to be so.

Mr Speaker: The last question in this session goes to Mr Philip Hollobone.

Iran (Support for Shia Islamists Abroad)

15. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps he, Ministers of his Department and the British Embassy in Tehran have taken to tackle the threat posed by Iran’s support for Shia Islamists abroad; and if he will make a statement.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful he is in his place. He has worked incredibly hard on this. [Interruption.] My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary says from a sedentary position that he would be happy to meet him at the earliest convenient opportunity.

Liz McInnes: The last question in this session goes to Mr Philip Hollobone.
Mr Hollobone: Since sanctions relief started in 2015 and we re-established diplomatic relations, Iran has become the world’s third-largest natural gas producer and fourth-largest oil producer, and is using these funds to finance terrorist proxies—Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen. What, realistically, are we doing to stop that?

Alistair Burt: Iran’s activities in the region, and its interference and its sponsoring of terrorist groups, are a matter of concern for the UK, as well as for other states. Individual sanctions remain in place in relation to Iranian entities, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—a demonstration of the world’s commitment on this. However, more must be done. Iran must recognise that not only must it keep to the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, but other activities need to be dealt with if it is to return to a proper place in the company of nations.

Topical Questions

T1. [906060] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My immediate priority is to mobilise international support for the chemical weapons convention. A special session of the Conference of the States Parties of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will open in The Hague today, and I hope all countries will support the UK-drafted decision, which would strengthen the OPCW. Later this week, Denmark will host a conference on reform in Ukraine, following the UK’s own successful conference, helping to modernise the economy, defeat corruption and bolster Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Mr Cunningham: What is the Foreign Secretary doing to promote a ceasefire in Yemen, given the situation there, with the potential for famine and carnage in that country?

Boris Johnson: I talked last night to both UN Special Representative Martin Griffiths and the Emirati Deputy Foreign Minister, Anwar Gargash. We are urging the coalition parties to engage in a political process as fast as possible. We believe there is scope for a political process, and we have made that point consistently over the past few months.

T2. [906061] John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): In recent months, Gaza-based terrorists have not only renewed the firing of rockets into Israel, but adopted a new tactic of dispatching airborne fire-bombs, and even explosives, across the border using kites. Although that may sound crude, it poses a real risk to life and has caused extensive fire damage to agricultural fields in Israel. Will the Minister therefore join me in condemning those actions?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Yes, my hon. Friend is right; these kites sound innocent, but they have indeed done a significant amount of damage in financial terms, to fields, and there are significant risks. It does not in any way help a resolution of issues if these projectiles continue to come from Gaza, and of course we condemn such actions.

T4. [906063] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): A fortnight ago, Amnesty International released a report that showed shocking violence and human rights violations in anglophone Cameroon. What assessment have the Government made of that report? If they think the situation is that bad, will the Minister tell the Home Office not to deport my constituent Mr Tabago back to Cameroon?

The Minister for Africa (Harriet Baldwin): I am aware of that report, and I travelled to Cameroon earlier this year to encourage its Government, in this election year, to engage in dialogue and try to resolve some of the differences with the anglophone separatist movement through democracy and observing human rights.

T3. [906062] David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that global Britain means that post-Brexit the UK can negotiate trade deals and strengthen relationships with countries such as those in South America, with which we have perhaps not had the closest relationship in the past?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is exactly right about that. I was thrilled to be the first Foreign Secretary to go to Peru for 52 years, and the first to go to Argentina and to Chile for 25 years. We will find Governments and populations there who are immensely anglophile and yearning to do free trade deals.

T5. [906064] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the past few days, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that Venezuelan security forces have killed more than 500 people, and at least some of those killings can be directly connected back to the Maduro regime. What discussions have Ministers been having with the authorities there about human rights, freedom and the rule of law?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady’s concerns are shared by all the countries surrounding Venezuela, and the UK signed up to the conclusions of the Lima Group. Yesterday, in the Foreign Affairs Council, the European Union agreed further targeted sanctions against individuals in the Maduro regime.

T6. [906065] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The Hamas terrorist group continues to misappropriate international aid to rebuild its terror infrastructure, including attack tunnels into Israel. This is deeply concerning. What does the Foreign Secretary intend to do, alongside our international partners, to limit Hamas’s dangerous influence in Gaza?

Alistair Burt: There are strict controls, as there must be, on the passage and entry of goods into Gaza, to make sure that they are not used for the wrong purpose. The United Kingdom makes sure that all its aid that is delivered to Gaza goes through international partners,
so that there cannot be such diversion. It is an issue and it must be dealt with, alongside a variety of issues for the people of Gaza.

T7. [906066] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Mr Erdogan’s re-election heightens the fear that he will step up the persecution of academics. Universities such as the University of Oxford have a proud tradition of being safe havens for bona fide dissenters; will the Minister do all that he can to make sure that our consulates are poised to act if they are asked for help?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As I am sure the hon. Lady understands, our state of emergency remains in conformity with international humanitarian law, and our lawyers believe that it is still on this side of the line.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Last week’s visit by the Thai Prime Minister highlighted his Government’s commitment to the restoration of parliamentary democracy in Thailand, where there will be elections next February. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, following the recent remarkable elections in Malaysia, that is a very positive development for the region, and that the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has an important role to play in supporting and encouraging successful democracies in south-east Asia?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thailand is an important partner of the UK, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, whoever its chairman may be, has an extremely important role to play in this matter. My hon. Friend rightly points out that there is a sense of revitalisation, particularly in respect of anti-corruption and the culture of cronyism throughout the region. We were delighted to see Prime Minister Prayuth visit London and we are looking forward to the elections in Thailand in the early part of next year.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): In the light of the legitimate concerns expressed by global businesses such as Airbus, Siemens and BMW about the post-Brexit world, will the Secretary of State confirm that and remotely justify why his response was to say “F business”?

Boris Johnson: I do not think anybody could doubt the Government’s passionate support for business. It may be that I have from time to time expressed scepticism about some of the views of those who profess to speak up for business.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What is my hon. Friend’s assessment of the state of the preparations for the elections in Democratic Republic of the Congo at the end of this year?

Harriett Baldwin: As my hon. Friend is aware, I travelled to the country—I think it was last month—to make that assessment. I can share with him that, as things stand, our assessment is that things are on track to respect the accord de la Saint-Sylvestre and to hold elections on 23 December, but we remain vigilant in our work with the Government there and are doing everything that we can to ensure that those elections take place.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the concerns expressed in this House today, and on previous occasions, will the Secretary of State use Friday the 13th to impress on this US President that we do not share his attitude to human rights, particularly his withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council, and that we will maintain this country’s position as an honest broker in areas of tensions such as Israel, the middle east and Asia?

Boris Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will have heard my answer to the first question, which was exactly on the lines that she proposes.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): It is now for over six years that the Ecuadorian embassy has been abused in its purpose as an embassy. How long are the Government going to put up with this?
Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend has raised on a number of occasions the issue of Julian Assange who is, of course, in the embassy of his own choice. We are, however, increasingly concerned about his health. It is our wish that this is brought to an end, and we would like to make the assurance that if he were to step out of the embassy, he would be treated humanely and properly. The first priority would be to look after his health, which we think is deteriorating.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The car industry today is the latest in warning that the uncertainty around Brexit could put hundreds of thousands of jobs at risk. Yesterday, the Business Secretary said that we should take the concerns of industry seriously. Does the Foreign Secretary agree?

Boris Johnson: Of course I agree with that. To cheer up the hon. Lady, I point out that today it was confirmed that the UK is still the recipient of the biggest share of inward investment in Europe and, indeed, that our share is growing.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Ahead of the important Balkans conference, does the Foreign Secretary agree that political and diplomatic dialogue, particularly in the western Balkans, rather than nationalism gives that region a bright future?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right and we look forward to welcoming all participants to the Western Balkans summit on 12 July where, among other things, we will be able to chart the progress that has been made on the Macedonian name issue.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In advance of the visit to the United Kingdom of the President of the United States, and in the knowledge that Northern Ireland is the recipient of the highest levels of foreign and direct investment from the United States, will the Secretary of State make it clear to the ambassador that Northern Ireland is open to the President for a visit, and that he will receive a considerable welcome there?

Boris Johnson: I am sure that that point will be well taken by Woody Johnson.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Home Secretary on providing India with the same visa controls as other friendly countries?

Boris Johnson: I have noticed the discrepancy to which my hon. Friend alludes, and we are in discussions about that now.
Points of Order

12.38 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A flurry of points of order. What a joyous occasion.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday evening, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work published a written statement on the personal independence payment. The statement covered a range of issues, including an announcement that a new process to identify people affected by last year’s High Court ruling concerning PIP mobility activity I has begun. The statement raises some real concerns and leaves many questions unanswered. In the light of that, have you, Mr Speaker, had any indication as to whether the Minister will be making an oral statement on these important issues so that Members of this House can properly question her?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that I have received no indication of any plan on the part of a Minister to deliver an oral statement to the House on the subject. However, she has flagged up her very real concern and dissatisfaction, which will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. There are many days to go between now and the summer recess and it is a matter to which, I suspect, she will wish to return, quite conceivably, on the Floor of the House.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on a matter of procedure. Is there any provision in the Standing Orders of this House that defines the notion or action of flip-flopping? If not, could “Erskine May” be updated to include this, because it happens increasingly frequently in this House? Yesterday, within 24 hours, the Scottish National party orchestrated the most spectacular political flip-flop, as it backed Heathrow expansion but then thought that he has the last word—and occasionally does—so we will give him a chance.

Chris Bryant: I am sure that you will have the last word on this, Mr Speaker. It would of course be available under “Erskine May”—I know this is deplored, but none the less it is sometimes enacted—for people to shout one thing and vote another, which is deprecated by the Chair. For that matter, sometimes people walk through both Division Lobbies, which could be described as flip-flopping, surely.

Mr Speaker: It could be. The hon. Gentleman is right that the first practice that he mentioned is very much deprecated. Members should not shout in one direction and vote in the opposite direction; he or she can choose not to vote, but should not vote in the opposite direction. The hon. Gentleman is also right that, although it does happen from time to time—one suspects, sometimes with a degree of official encouragement from some quarters—the practice of Members voting in both Lobbies, thereby cancelling out their vote, is very strongly deprecated from the Chair. It seems to me to be not a proper way to conduct oneself in the House. Anyway, the hon. Gentleman has got across his point about the meaning of flip-flopping. I dare say that it will be heard by many people across the Rhondda and possibly elsewhere.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not on the subject of flip-flopping?

Patrick Grady: No; it is altogether more serious. At the start of the sitting, you announced that Royal Assent had been granted to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I wonder whether you can advise how we can get it on the record that this is the first time that has happened without the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament. This is a very serious issue, with which I know that the House has dealt. The Government had been repeatedly requested not to send the Bill for Royal Assent until an agreement had been reached. Will you further advise what opportunities exist for Members to interrogate the Government’s decision-making process around that matter?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that my advice is required. The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation; he has put the point forcefully on the record. As to opportunities for scrutiny, the hon. Gentleman is the most eager of beavers in this Chamber and he also has very, very important responsibilities regarding his colleagues, in relation to whom he exercises discipline and offers career development opportunities if they comply. I therefore feel sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to arrange for colleagues to air this matter between now and the summer recess, and the glow of contentment that he is displaying suggests that he knows that I am right.
Food Advertising (Protection of Children from Targeting)

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

12.43 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prevent the marketing and advertising of food that does not meet certain nutritional requirements from being targeted at children.

We are all united in ensuring that children have the best possible start in life, and that includes ensuring that they have a healthy start. Sadly, for all too many young people, that is not the case—and the problem is even worse in more deprived groups. Take Scotland, where in 2015-16 the most deprived areas had a 16% rate of childhood obesity, compared with 12% in the least deprived. In fact, nearly 30% of children are at risk of obesity or of being overweight in Scotland. However, this issue affects the whole United Kingdom, with one in five children starting primary school obese or overweight. According to the Centre for Social Justice, obesity will cost our economy £50 billion by 2050.

Of course, we all know the cause of these shocking figures. Bluntly, there are far too many children in this country who are not eating enough of the food that they need and too much of the food that they do not need. Not only does this affect their day-to-day lives, but the implications for later life cannot be overestimated, not least given that obesity is the biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking—a statistic that very few are aware of. There is no simple solution to this, and no silver bullet for this growing problem with childhood obesity. While I warmly welcome the Government’s recently announced consultation, it certainly cannot be left only to Acts of Parliament and regulations from Government Departments. That will not be sufficient and would not deliver the results we so desperately need. The driving force must come from individual households—parents and young people—making the right choices to enjoy healthy lifestyles.

But there are steps that would help, and it would be a failing of this House not to match fine rhetoric with decisive action. Schemes such as the Daily Mile, started in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), contribute to helping young people to get active and stay fit. Rolling this out across the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Desmond Swayne) yesterday, I was pleased to see Google launch YouTube Kids—a safe place for child-friendly videos. That is a recognition, albeit a small one, that online publishers have just as much work to do as broadcasters in protecting children’s health. There should also be, for online publishers, a very straightforward ban on junk food promotions for children and young people.

I have heard the argument that advertising does not have an impact on obesity and that therefore the Government should not intervene, but that is a red herring. A good illustration of this is the money spent on advertising in 2015. Only 1.2% of all food and non-alcoholic drink advertising was spend for advertising vegetables, while 22.2% was used for advertising cakes, biscuits, confectionery and ice cream. If producers did not see significant return for their expenditure, it simply would not be spent. Why, if advertising is such a distraction, do companies spend a quarter of a billion pounds on it and lobby so vociferously for no extension of advertising restrictions? Focus groups categorically suggest that children not only remember the adverts they see in detail but that they influence what they pester their parents for.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not calling for a ban on all junk food advertising—that would be a sledgehammer to crack a nut—but we cannot ignore the fact that advertising is contributing to childhood obesity and that existing loopholes must be closed. I do not suggest that this will end childhood obesity. It is far too complex a challenge for such an easy solution. The Government are absolutely right to bring forward a whole range of solutions to tackle this issue, and a cross-departmental approach is exactly what we need. We have a responsibility to give our children the best possible chance at the start of their life, and this Bill, which seeks to avoid such direct targeting, is part of delivering that best start.

12.50 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Yesterday, after the urgent question, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the
Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), why children from the poorest areas are disproportionately among the fattest, and I suggested that it was not because they watched more adverts. He responded that it might be the case that they watched more adverts. I suggest to my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) that a piece of work needs to be done before the Bill proceeds, to establish the exact role of advertising in making our children so much fatter. The reality is that children have always been the target of such advertising. She will be too young to recall, but I certainly remember the Milkybar kid, whose unique selling attraction was that the Milkybars were going to be on him.

My hon. Friend suggested a much more profitable avenue for our attention. She pointed out that by the time children came to school, one in five was already too fat. We will have those children in school for the best part of 15 years, for five days a week and 40 weeks a year. It would be staggeringly unproductive if we did not use that time to sufficiently exercise them to make them thinner. I suggest that if we have not the political will to do that, advertising is not going to do the job.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kirstene Hair, Kerry McCarthy, Conor McGinn, Fiona Bruce, Andrew Selous, Stuart C. McDonald, John Lamont, Paul Masterton, Mr Alister Jack, Jamie Stone, Mr Alistair Carmichael and Bill Grant present the Bill.

Kirstene Hair accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 237).

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for hearing a point of order at this stage in our proceedings. You may be aware that it is reported in The Times today that the United States Government have sought to interfere in the contents of the report of the Intelligence and Security Committee on United Kingdom involvement in rendition. If that report is true, it is a matter of the greatest and gravest importance for the House. I can think of no precedent for a foreign power seeking to interfere in the workings of our Committees. What protection can you give to the Committees of the House to ensure that they are allowed to do their work in the way that they are mandated to by us? Have you had any indications from the Government about their intention to bring the House up to speed and make us fully informed in relation to that matter?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I certainly do not seek to cavil at what he has said, because I am familiar with the thrust of the argument and concern that he is advocating to the House. I will just say that the Committee is not in fact a Committee of the House; it is a statutory Committee, in a slightly different category to all the other Committees to which we regularly refer. Nevertheless, I have heard what he said. I have no knowledge of the matter, and I have not myself read the report to which he refers.

If memory serves me correctly, the Committee is chaired by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who is a very senior and respected Member of the House. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is well aware of the remit and autonomy of the Committee. If he felt that his Committee was being interfered with in any way, I rather doubt that he would be backwards in coming forwards. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is himself a former senior member of the coalition Government. He will know very well, I am sure, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, and he might wish to approach him for a brief conversation, not on the detail of the report, but about his concern. If that does not satisfy him, I have a feeling that I will be hearing from him again.
Draft EU-Canada Trade Agreement Order


12.56 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I beg to move,

That the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Canada Trade Agreement) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.

I am delighted that we have the opportunity once again to debate the comprehensive economic and trade agreement between the EU and Canada, known as CETA, and that this is taking place on the Floor of this House. This follows on from the thorough and constructive debate last year and the overwhelming support shown by the full House in a subsequent deferred Division. I note that a majority of those on the Labour Benches who voted in that Division chose rightly to vote in favour of the agreement, and I hope they will continue to do so, because this debate comes at a crucial point in world trade, with the potentially destructive rise in protectionist sentiments.

Free trade is the means by which we have collectively taken millions of people out of abject poverty in the last generation, and we must not put that progress into reverse. We should also realise that trade is not an end in itself, but a means to widen shared prosperity. That prosperity underpins social cohesion and, in turn, political stability. That political stability, in turn, is the building block of our collective security. To interrupt the flow of prosperity is to risk creating a torrent of instability. We have an opportunity today to reaffirm Britain's commitment to the principles of free trade and the application of an international rules-based system.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State accept that after exit day, we will be bound by these treaties with Canada and hopefully Japan, but that there is no legal obligation for Canada and Japan to honour their obligations to us, because we will be out of the EU? That is the big problem with leaving the customs union.

Dr Fox: We already have had substantial bilateral discussions with Canada, and it agrees with the United Kingdom that CETA should form the basis of a bilateral agreement between the UK and Canada as we leave. However, we will have greater leeway to look at what additional elements we might want to include when we are no longer tied to the European Union.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I will make some progress.

This Government are clear that CETA is a good deal for Europe and a good deal for the United Kingdom. Our total trade with Canada already stood at £16.5 billion last year, up 6.4% on the previous year, with a services surplus of £1.9 billion. CETA will improve on this already strong economic partnership. It is an agreement that will potentially boost our GDP by hundreds of millions of pounds a year. It will bring down trade costs, boost trade and investment, promote jobs and growth and increase our ability to access Canadian goods, services and procurement markets, benefiting a wide range of UK businesses and consumers. More trade and more growth result in more money for the Treasury, with benefits for our publicly funded services. CETA is a comprehensive and ambitious agreement—the most comprehensive agreement between the EU and an advanced partner economy that has come into force so far.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): My right hon. Friend referred to the benefits that may flow to Canada, the UK and the EU, but there is a broader point to be made today about the benefits of free trade to the whole world. I hope that the House—hopefully united, and with Opposition Members hopefully united as well—can send the signal that free trade is a good thing for the world economy and that it is free trade that brings people out of poverty on a global basis.

Dr Fox: I think that something we share across the House is the belief that we would prefer people to be able to trade their way sustainably out of poverty rather than having to depend on aid budgets, and, of course, free trade is one of the key ways of ensuring that that happens. My hon. Friend is right: it is important that we send a signal, and I hope we can add to the signal that we sent last time that it is not possible to believe in the concept of free trade while not agreeing with any of the specific agreements that make free trade happen. It is important that we have consistency throughout.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am picking up the clear message that it is the view of the Brexiteer UK Government that the European Union has negotiated a very good trade deal. Is that correct?

Dr Fox: We think it is the most advanced and ambitious trade deal that the EU has produced so far. That is not to say that it could not have been more ambitious in some areas, such as services. There is, of course, room for improvement in the future.

Canada is an important strategic partner too. As one of the “Five Eyes”, and as a member of NATO, the Commonwealth, the G7 and the G20, we have bonds that go far beyond just our trading relationship.

As Members will know, CETA was provisionally applied in September last year, removing 98% of the tariffs previously faced by UK businesses at the Canadian border, and UK firms are already benefiting. We have seen drinks exporters such as Dorset’s Black Cow Vodka and Kent-based sparkling wine producer Hush Heath Estate improve their market access and profitability with the reductions in tariff and non-tariff barriers. We are also seeing new UK exporters to Canada, including
Seedlip, which produces the world’s first distilled non-alcoholic spirit. Under CETA, Seedlip does not have to pay the 11% pre-CETA tariffs on its product.

Moordale Foods, which entered the Canadian market in March 2017 with assistance from the Department, was helped by CETA duty elimination. Pre-CETA, its range of products would have been subject to duties of 12.5%. Its prices in Canada are now closer than ever to its current domestic UK price, and its products can now be found in key Canadian gourmet food outlets, including the flagship Saks Fifth Avenue food hall in Toronto. That is an example of trade in action, and of how it will help the United Kingdom to earn more abroad and provide more jobs in the UK.

Chris Bryant: The Secretary of State has suggested that when we leave the European Union, there will be things that he will wish to secure from a new trade deal that the UK will sign with Canada, in addition to what this trade deal leaves us. Can he list three things that he would like to see in that new deal?

Dr Fox: As we will be in negotiation with Canada, I will not enter into that, but, as I have said, there are areas in which the final agreement was not sufficiently ambitious, such as services, and also issues related to data movement. There are areas in which the United Kingdom will have greater freedom when we are outside the European Union.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be interested to know that while Wensleydale Creamery, which is just outside my constituency and makes fantastic cheese, is already trading with Canada, the agreement is bound to help it to increase that trade. He has identified the benefits of free trade very clearly, but does he accept that we also need fair trade, so that the standards—the non-tariff barriers to which he has referred—are the same on both sides of the trade agreement, and businesses are treated fairly?

Dr Fox: That is a good point. The debate tends to revolve around tariffs rather than non-tariff barriers, which are often the biggest impediments to trade. However, as has been pointed out by Members on both sides of the House, since 2010 an increasing number of non-tariff barriers have been applied by the G20 countries. It is not acceptable for the richest countries in the world to say, “We have done very well out of free trade,” and then to pull up the drawbridge behind them. If we ourselves have benefited from free trade, it is our moral duty to ensure that generations after us, both at home and internationally, benefit from it as well.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making a compelling case for supporting the trade deal, and there is a great deal of cross-party support for it, but will he confirm for the record how long it took to agree the deal with Canada, and how long it will take him to ensure that we have the same deal, or something better, once we have left the EU?

Dr Fox: As I have already said, and as we have already agreed with Canada, the existing agreement will form the basis for the bilateral agreement that we will have with Canada when we leave the European Union. If we enact the Trade Bill—which Labour voted against last time—we will have no friction as we leave the EU, because this agreement will continue. However, that does not close down the possibility of our being able to improve on it in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Fox: I will give way—for the last time, for the moment—to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood),

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am glad that the Secretary of State is now stressing to Labour Members, who do not seem to understand it, that the deal that the EU has done novates to us as well as to the rest of the EU. The EU that signed the agreement will not be in existence once we have left, so there is an equal opportunity for it to novate to us. There is no reason why it will not novate to us, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be able to improve on it subsequently.

Dr Fox: I have said twice that we have already had discussions with Canada to see how we can build on the agreement that we will inherit as we leave the European Union. It is not a question of choosing one or the other. The agreement will already be here for us—assuming, that is, that the House of Commons passes the trade legislation which is necessary to give our businesses, our communities and our workers the certainty of continuity as we leave the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Fox: I will make some progress.

In parallel with the trade benefits to which I referred, investment in the UK from Canada continues to grow. In 2016, Canada had £18.6 billion invested in the UK and we had £21.1 billion invested in Canada.

As I have said, ratifying CETA is also an important step towards our future trading relationship with Canada as we prepare to take advantage of the opportunities offered by our exit from the European Union. During the Prime Minister’s visit to Canada in September last year, both she and Prime Minister Trudeau reiterated their intention to seek to “transition” CETA swiftly and seamlessly into a UK-Canada deal once the UK has left the EU, and formally announced the establishment of a working group to ensure that the transition was as seamless as possible. Officials from our two countries have already begun to meet to discuss that transition. It is important that, as a first step, we prevent a “cliff edge” for British and Canadian businesses.

Of course, while we remain in the EU we continue to support its ambitious trade agenda. Free trade is not a zero-sum game, but rather a win-win. Ratifying CETA will send a strong message about our determination to champion free trade, to seek global trade liberalisation wherever we can, and to support the rules-based international trading system to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes. That is a key part of the Government’s vision of delivering a prosperous and truly global Britain as we leave the European Union—

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—
Dr Fox:—which could not be a better way to lead into my hon. Friend’s intervention.

Sir William Cash: I congratulate my right hon. Friend not only on what he has said today—which is completely correct—but on the fact that the repeal Act to which Her Majesty has just assented reinforces the point that we will now be able to make our own international trade deals under that Act. I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Government on that achievement.

Dr Fox: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Of course, our ability to take full advantage of what we have already agreed depends on our passing both the Trade Bill and the customs Bill in this House. If we are unable to do so, we will be unable to provide that continuity for businesses and workers in the United Kingdom, which would be hugely to their disadvantage. I hope that the Opposition will think again about their vote against the Trade Bill on Second Reading, and will give it the fair wind that it deserves during its subsequent stages.

It is important for the UK that CETA is ratified successfully by all EU member states, because ratification by all member states is required for the treaty to enter fully into force. This will give Canadian and EU businesses greater certainty that the agreement will continue into the future.

Areas that were not provisionally applied include a large part of the chapter on investment, including the new investment court system, about which there has been extensive discussion in Parliament and in wider civil society. The UK supports the principle of investment protection, and looks forward to engaging further with the Commission on the technical detail of the investment court system. We support the objectives of obtaining fair outcomes for claims, high ethical standards for arbitrators and increased transparency of tribunal hearings.

I also want to be clear that investment protection provisions protect investors from discriminatory or unfair treatment by a state. This includes protection of UK institutional investors—for example, pension funds—where we have a duty to ensure that individual investments are protected. We have over 90 such agreements in place with other countries. There has never been a successful investor-state dispute settlement claim brought against the United Kingdom, nor has the threat of potential claims affected any Government’s legislative programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallingford) (LD): Will the Secretary of State confirm that any investment court system is in fact a pooling of sovereignty? He will be aware that Canada and the EU have agreed that they want to transform the investment court system into something more open, transparent and global. Will he confirm that the UK Government will also undertake to do that after Brexit?

Dr Fox: I have set out what I believe are the principles, but the mechanism may well be different. The Commission has not yet finished its work on the technical detail of the ICS. We have reservations about the ICS as a system, but, as I have set out, we believe that there needs to be protection for investors. What we cannot do as a country is say that our investors should be protected overseas when they make investments of UK money, but a reciprocal agreement should not be in place for others. We have to ensure that this is fair and equitable, and that is what we seek to do. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman in all candour that I am not terribly attracted by the ICS, but we want to see the detail that the European Commission comes to and, when we leave the European Union, we will want to discuss with Canada what we think, on a bilateral basis, the best disputes resolution system might be.

It is also important to note that the customary international right to regulate has been re-emphasised in this agreement. Moreover, the agreement explicitly provides that member states should not reduce their labour or environmental standards to encourage trade and investment, ensuring that our high standards are not affected by this agreement. Let me say that nothing in CETA prevents the UK from regulating in the pursuit of legitimate public policy objectives.

Such objectives include the national health service. This Government have been absolutely clear that protecting the NHS is of the utmost importance for the UK. The delivery of public health services is safeguarded in the trade in services aspects of all EU free trade agreements, including CETA. Neither will anything in CETA prevent future Governments from taking back into public ownership—should they be crazy enough to do so—any services currently run by the private sector. The legal text makes this clear, if Labour Members would like to read it, although I have to say that the fear of nationalisation is the No. 1 issue that potential investors currently give for thinking twice about the UK as a foreign direct investment destination.

In fact, robust protections in CETA are covered in a number of related articles and reservations in the text. A key article is article 9.2, in chapter 9 on cross-border trade in services, which excludes services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority from measures affecting trade in services. In addition, in annex II on reservations applicable in the European Union, the UK has gone beyond the EU-wide reservations and has included additional national reservations for doctors, privately funded ambulances and residential health facilities, and the majority of privately funded social services. The UK Government will continue to ensure that decisions about public services are made by the United Kingdom, not by our trade partners. This is a fundamental principle of our current and future trade policy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given these extensive labour and public sector protections, which I congratulate my right hon. Friend on negotiating, could this EU-Canada agreement not serve as a template for a UK-EU trade agreement on our exit?

Dr Fox: As the Prime Minister has made clear, we hope, given we are starting from the position of complete regulatory and legal identity with the European Union and given the size of our trade with the European Union—not least the fact that the European Union has a surplus in goods with the United Kingdom of almost £100 billion—that we would be able to negotiate an even more liberal agreement than CETA. That is of course a decision not just for the United Kingdom Government, but for the other 27 Governments, who need to look not to political ideology, but to the economic wellbeing of their own citizens.
Let me say something on scrutiny. We have committed, through our White Paper published last year, that we will ensure appropriate parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements in Canada above all. We have also made it clear that we will respect the UK’s future trade agreements, and we will bring forward proposals in Parliament in due course.

I would like to provide further reassurance to the House about the Government’s ongoing commitment to openness and transparency. Indeed, we have scheduled a debate on the Floor of the House on the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement, which the Minister for Trade Policy—it is a pleasure to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) to his position on the Front Bench—will be leading straight after this debate. This is already over and above the engagement required for EU-only trade agreements.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Should the right hon. Gentleman be talking not only about “Parliament”, but about “Parliaments”? Last week, the International Trade Committee took evidence from John Weekes, the former Canadian ambassador to the World Trade Organisation. He was also Canada’s chief negotiator for the North American free trade agreement, and an adviser to the Canadian Government and Parliament on CETA. One of the things he was asked was whether the central Government in Canada were tempted to make a power grab, or to deal with the provinces as they stand. He said that it added a degree of complexity, but that it made for a better deal at the end to respect the provinces of Canada, rather than deal with this centrally. Should the UK Government not ape that, and should the Secretary of State talk not just about Parliament, but about Parliaments? If we reach that stage when Scotland is still in the UK, we will need such respect.

Dr Fox: I have considerable sympathy with the hon. Gentleman, although trade is a reserved power for this Parliament. We have to accept as a country that, in an age of increased consumer awareness of trade, the public will want a genuine consultation about any future agreements that the Government reach. That requires us to avoid some of the pitfalls that occurred with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, when the public felt that they had not been consulted during the process and were asked to take it or leave it.

It is therefore incumbent on Governments to devise mechanisms by which there is the fullest possible consultation not only with Parliament, devolved bodies and English regions, but with civil society. The Government will set out our proposals on that in the near future. I would add that I am grateful to the Select Committee for its thoughtful work on this area, because I think there will be quite strong consensus across the House about the mechanisms of consultation, even if we do not agree with the outcomes of such consultations.

I welcome this opportunity to make the case for CETA to Parliament, and to provide an opportunity, as the Government have done on previous EU free trade agreements, for full scrutiny of this important agreement. During the implementation period, the United Kingdom will retain access to EU free trade agreements, but we will also be able to negotiate, sign and ratify new UK-only free trade agreements for the first time in more than 40 years. In doing so, we will safeguard the benefits achieved in CETA for UK businesses and consumers, and lay a foundation for an even stronger relationship in the future. Canada is a progressive, dependable and honest trading partner which is committed, as we are, to the World Trade Organisation and the international rules-based system. This is an important time, internationally, to show our commitment to a free trading Commonwealth, G7 and NATO ally. I commend this order to the House.

1.19 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on the Floor of the House at last. The order will specify CETA as an EU treaty for the purposes of the European Communities Act 1972. It is important to recognise that, unfortunate though it may be, the agreement itself cannot be changed at this stage by anything we might say this afternoon.

We want a comprehensive and mutually beneficial trade agreement with Canada. We want to boost fair and open trade with our closest allies and neighbours. Of course we do. We share a common language, unique cultural and economic bonds, the same parliamentary model and a common legal tradition, and we count Canada among our closest, oldest and most trusted allies.

In 2016, our exports to Canada amounted to some £8.3 billion—our seventh-largest non-European export market. In turn, we are Canada’s third most important export market. Our appetite for Canadian goods means that Canada runs a trade surplus with us of some $6.8 billion according to 2017 figures. We are Canada’s most important European trading partner. The vast majority of Canada’s European-bound goods move through our ports. We are the second-biggest recipient of Canadian investment. Similarly, we are the second-biggest foreign direct investor into Canada. More than an estimated 700 British firms have an established presence in Canada and some 1,100 UK firms are owned or controlled by Canadian interests.

In matters of trade, the UK and Canada face similar issues. Boeing’s efforts to have punitive tariffs levied on Bombardier C Series aircraft threaten thousands of jobs both in Canada and here, where the company’s Northern Ireland plant engineers and manufactures wings for those aircraft. We both face the spurious and illegal tariffs imposed by President Trump on our steel and aluminium exports under the false pretence of national security.

Do we want a trade deal with Canada? Of course we do. Only by working together can we and Canada address and resolve American protectionism and make a concerted effort on the world stage to enforce the rules-based system that underpins international trade. Only by working together can we push for a serious response to global overcapacity issues.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will give way to my right hon. Friend in a moment if he is patient—I am sure he will be.
[Barry Gardiner]

Yes, a Labour Government would very much welcome a trade deal with Canada built on the commercial and diplomatic ties that bind our two countries; a deal that seeks to further elevate our shared standards, rights and protections; and a deal that would lead to increased economic prosperity and jobs. The EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement is not such an agreement.

John Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Given the considerable links and advantages of our relationship with Canada, if we cannot do a deal with Canada, which country can we do a deal with?

Barry Gardiner: The presumption in my right hon. Friend’s question is entirely wrong. The presumption is that we cannot do a trade deal with Canada, but of course we can. We want to do a trade deal with Canada, but he will recognise that we did not want the TTIP deal with the United States even though the United States perhaps has a claim above Canada’s to be our closest ally on the international stage. The question is not who but what. Of course we can do a deal, but it must be the right deal for British business and jobs.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I spend a lot of time in Canada as our trade envoy. What would the hon. Gentleman’s message be to those British companies I meet in Canada that tell me how the provisional application of CETA is helping to boost their trade in that country and open up procurement—there are $20 billion-worth of opportunities in the city of Toronto alone. He wishes to cut that off to British businesses by rejecting this deal, so what is his message to them when they are already benefiting and helping to support jobs in the United Kingdom?

Barry Gardiner: As I think I have already made clear to the House, we want those jobs and procurement opportunities, but we want them on the right terms.

Dr Fox: For the sake of clarity, is it the Opposition’s position that the United Kingdom should not ratify CETA?

Barry Gardiner: I will of course answer the right hon. Gentleman’s question—I will come to it later in my speech. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), the Secretary of State will just have to be patient a little longer.

The CETA deal has been marred by controversy. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets across Europe in protest. The deal was largely conducted in secrecy and with minimal consultation. It threatens the essential ability of Governments to legislate in the public interest. That is why it is so essential that Parliament has finally been afforded the opportunity to debate the agreement on the Floor of the House.

I pay tribute to the work of the European Scrutiny Committee under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who is no longer in his place. In this respect, the Committee made repeated attempts over the past two years to ensure that Parliament was given just such a chance. The debate has been pending since the Committee granted a scrutiny waiver to the Secretary of State in October 2016.

Catherine McKinnell: Going back to the earlier discussion, if the position is not to support the Canada trade deal, will my hon. Friend explain what the procedure is for negotiating a new trade deal with Canada, given the complexity of leaving the EU?

Barry Gardiner: I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the Secretary of State’s remarks. He has made it clear that negotiations are under way. The constitutional position is that all current agreements with third-party countries that we have through the EU will have to be rolled over as new agreements. They will be legally distinct. In that respect, they must all be renegotiated.

Several hon. Members rose—

Barry Gardiner: I see a lot of Members standing. I am happy to give way later in my remarks but I want to make progress now.

The debate has been pending since the European Scrutiny Committee granted a scrutiny waiver to the Secretary of State in October 2016 to proceed with signing the agreement in order to bring the trade elements, but not the investment elements, into provisional application. That waiver was on the express condition that there was prior debate on the Floor of the House. That debate did not take place.

It is unusual to bring a statutory instrument to the Floor of the House rather than to a Delegated Legislation Committee. The Government are pretending to have afforded the House the opportunity to properly debate and scrutinise a controversial agreement and one of the most extensive that the country has entered into—the Secretary of State has admitted as much. However, at this stage it is all too late. The agreement is signed and cannot be renegotiated.

On 5 July 2016, the European Commission published its proposals for the signature and provisional application of CETA. On 7 September 2016, the European Scrutiny Committee recommended an urgent debate on the Floor of the House, noting the significant political and legal importance of the agreement. On 6 October 2016, the Minister sought clearance from the Committee to sign the agreement without having such a debate. On 12 October 2016, the Committee granted the Government a conditional scrutiny waiver, allowing them to proceed with signing the agreement only after a debate on the Floor of the House—the Committee directed the Government to ensure such a debate. [Interruption.] I hear the Secretary of State muttering from a sedentary position, “Process, process, process,” but process is how the House ensures proper transparency and scrutiny.

On 17 October 2016, the Secretary of State advised the Committee that it was his intention to override scrutiny and proceed not only with the signature of the agreement but with its provisional application, despite the controversy attached to it and despite the fact that the House had been given no opportunity to scrutinise or debate it.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: No.

On 18 October 2016, the Government confirmed their support for signature, provisional application and conclusion of CETA. Overriding scrutiny, Mr Speaker,
is no minor matter. The Committee rightly called an emergency evidence session demanding that the Secretary of State account for his decision to overrule the Committee’s scrutiny reserve and to proceed with provisional application. The Secretary of State had the audacity to tell the Committee:

“I very much believe in the democratic process and the importance of transparency and, as the Committee knows, I have long been one of those Members who has been very much supportive of the scrutiny process and I’m sorry that the timescales meant that it was not possible to have a debate before decisions needed to be made on CETA.”

He went on to tell the Committee that this was “down to the parliamentary calendar and the timescales set for us. However, I therefore reinforce my commitment to the Committee today to hold such a debate and I’m very happy to have that debate on the Floor of the House. Our officials are already working with business managers to identify a date most likely, we understand, in November.”

That, for the avoidance of doubt, was November 2016.

So, November comes around and, having had no indication of a debate being forthcoming, the Committee published its summary of that urgent evidence session and noted:

“We consider such a debate to be urgent and ask that it be scheduled before 13 December”.

[Interruption.] I know the Secretary of State does not like this, because it brings up all the ways in which he has sought to avoid transparency and scrutiny in this place.

By 30 November, the Secretary of State failed to secure a debate in the timeframe he himself had suggested to the Committee. On 7 December, the Committee repeated the need for a debate and called for it to take place before mid-January 2017, recognising that the Secretary of State would not be bringing forth a debate by the earlier stipulated deadline of 13 December.

It was farcical. The Secretary of State had absolutely made it farcical, but it got worse. My office submitted a freedom of information request on 15 December requesting details of the correspondence between the Department and business managers regarding scheduling a debate on CETA since 1 December 2016. It may come as no surprise that the Department failed to respond within the suggested timeframe. However, a response was forthcoming by 25 January. Staggeringly, it admits in its response that the first attempt to bring forward a debate on CETA was not in July 2016, as one might expect, and not even in September when the House returned after summer recess. It was an email sent from an undisclosed official to the Government Chief Whip’s office on 25 October at 1.57 pm, just 24 hours prior to the Secretary of State’s scheduled appearance before the Select Committee.

For the avoidance of doubt, I want to reassure the House that the Secretary of State did not mislead. He did not mislead the Committee in any way when he told the hon. Member for Stone that “our officials are already working with business managers to identify a date”.

They had been: for a whole 24 hours and 33 minutes. If it should be that prior to being summoned to give evidence to the European Scrutiny Committee on why the Government had blatantly ignored the Committee’s limited and conditional waiver and the condition that a debate take place, the Secretary of State had instructed his officials to come up with a cover, at least the literal interpretation of his words was strictly accurate. More troubling is his apology to the Committee implying that there had been efforts to find time to schedule a debate, saying,

“I am sorry that the timescales meant that it was not possible to have a debate before decisions needed to be made on CETA in the Council.”

Jeremy Quin: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. For someone who seems so keen to have had a debate on this particular treaty, he seems very, very wary about actually getting on to the substance of the issue we are here to discuss. The only point on which I have heard him say he disagrees with what is laid before the House is some wording about it impinging on national Parliaments to regulate their own affairs. What bit of the treaty does he disagree with? Is it chapter 23, which ensures that we protect employment rights? Is it chapter 24, which ensures that we protect environmental rights? Or is it the legal text that provides protections for our NHS? What is it that he disagrees with?

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pressing me on to the substantive part of the debate, but he will understand that the way in which international treaties progress through this House, the way in which they are scrutinised and the transparency with which that is done are matters of real importance. The reason why is that the substance of these treaties needs to be agreed in terms of a mandate. It then needs to be ensured that the scrutiny that applies is available to Members of this House at all stages. That is what in this situation entirely failed to happen.

The Secretary of State said:

“I am sorry that the timescales meant that it was not possible to have a debate before decisions needed to be made on CETA in the Council. This was down to the parliamentary calendar and the timescale set for us.”

“Not possible”? How did he know? He never bothered to ask. Why would the Government so determinedly pursue such a tack? The Secretary of State told us why when he admitted to the Committee in October 2016 that the “UK could not be seen to block the agreement as it would send a negative signal to Canada.”

In a meeting between the Secretary of State and his Canadian counterpart that took place on 16 July, we are told by the then Canadian Trade Minister, Chrystia Freeland, that

“when I asked him if I could count on his and Britain’s continued support for CETA, he told me Britain would not just be supporting CETA. Britain would be pushing for CETA at the EU table.”

Heaven forfend that Parliament might have had a say in such a deal now that the Secretary of State had given his gentleman’s agreement to Canada!

There are two key issues that Members need to consider today. One is the issue of substance, and we will come on to the reservations on that score that exist throughout Europe, not just on the Opposition Benches, where they are currently being debated in constitutional courts and campaigned on by colleagues in the trade union movement. Incidentally, they were fully set out in Labour’s general election manifesto last year. The second issue is process. Why have the Government repeatedly
attempted to avoid proper scrutiny of the agreement? The reality of today’s debate is that it is nothing more than a masquerading exercise designed to give the illusion of scrutiny when there has in fact been so little. We are now too late in the process and can do nothing to alter its course.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I think many people watching will want to be clear, given the fragile and febrile nature of their politics in the UK at the moment, on what position the hon. Gentleman would adopt on CETA if he was to find himself International Trade Secretary in a few months’ time.

Barry Gardiner: If we were out of the European Union, we would then be negotiating a new trade agreement with Canada and we would ensure that all—[Interruption.] Much that is in CETA is to be welcomed, as was outlined by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) who intervened on me earlier. Much of it is to be welcomed, but there are aspects of the trade agreement that the hon. Gentleman will recognise, and all of Europe recognises, as simply unacceptable.

Other Parliaments have, of course, had the opportunity to properly register their views on this agreement and perhaps this illustrates why the Secretary of State has been so concerned about allowing the House to have its say. In the Committee stage of the Trade Bill, I set out how a Labour Government would ensure full and proper consultation with key stakeholders—businesses, unions, civil society and the devolved Administrations—in advance of entering into negotiations on trade talks. My party believes that Parliament should have a vote to approve such mandates. That was why we tabled amendments to the Bill in respect of the same, but the Government voted down every single amendment we put forward.

Dr Fox: Are we then to assume that, for the purposes of consistency, Labour will table a negative motion under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—or CRAG—procedure?

Barry Gardiner: I will come on to our position in due course.

The European Commission hailed CETA, calling it “the most ambitious trade agreement between countries ever undertaken.” However, unlike other deals currently being progressed by the European Commission, it is a mixed agreement—trade and investment.

The investment provisions of CETA touch on matters of national competence and, as such, the agreement must be ratified at the national level and the regional level where appropriate. The European Commission and respective national Governments have sought to circumvent this process by provisionally applying CETA since 21 September last year, but the deal has not been ratified and is therefore not yet fully enforceable. To understand why, we need to look at the Walloon Parliament in Belgium, which refused to ratify the agreement over concerns about investment aspects of it and, in particular, the investor-state dispute settlement mechanism, now known under this agreement as the investment court system. This is where process meets substance. Belgium has referred the matter to the European Court of Justice to seek a ruling on whether the investment court system is even compatible with EU law.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case about a very flawed process. Following public pressure, the provisions in CETA for an investment court system are still only marginally better than the original investor-state dispute settlement system. Does he share my concern that this still amounts to a parallel justice system for large corporations that could render the UK vulnerable to lawsuits, such as that brought by Veolia against Egypt for introducing a minimum wage?

Barry Gardiner: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s concern. That is one reason why it was part of the Labour party’s manifesto at the last election that we would not approve trade agreements that had these mechanisms in them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is some pressure on time. The hon. Gentleman has been at it for over 20 minutes and we still do not know where he stands. Is it in order for him to keep the House in such suspense?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is quite in order for the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) to be making his opening remarks. I am sure he is not going to be too much longer; there are a lot of people waiting to speak.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Owen Smith: Would he give way to a Labour colleague?

Barry Gardiner: I would give way to a Labour colleague.

Just last week, the incoming Italian Government signalled that they too would refuse to ratify CETA when the new Agriculture Minister indicated that the lack of protections for Italian food producers presented a serious threat to the sector, calling the deal wrong and risky. France, Germany and the Netherlands have not ratified the agreement, and the Dutch Government are waiting on the ECJ ruling before determining how to proceed. In Germany, the issue is being heard in a case before its domestic constitutional courts to determine whether the investment court system is even compatible with the German constitution.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point but, if CETA is such a terrible deal, why did so many Labour Members of the European Parliament vote for it, including their lead spokesman on the issue, who had full transparency on the deal as it was negotiated?

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady makes a false premise. Many parts of this deal would be welcomed, but there are essential parts of it that cannot be welcomed and which would stop us, therefore, being able to ratify it in the way she suggests.
The ISDS mechanisms give superior legal rights only to foreign investors to raise disputes against our Government to petition for compensation when their profits, or even their potential profits, are impacted by legislative or public policy decisions. This effectively allows companies to sue Governments when they are legislating in the public interest; for example, by introducing plain packaging for cigarettes, national insurance, minimum wages or even banning fracking. These provisions have become increasingly commonplace in new-generation trade agreements and this is what has resulted in such widespread international public outcry against deals such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and CETA.

The proliferation of investor-state dispute settlements can encourage treaty shopping, whereby investors restructure their activities to establish in countries where they may benefit from ISDS mechanisms, should they seek to effect policy change or petition for compensation. While the Government have previously argued that the UK has only ever been subject to four such dispute cases, and that the UK never lost such a case, it begs the question: why does the Secretary of State feel that this mechanism needs to be incorporated in a deal with a country such as Canada?

Geraint Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will give way to my hon. Friend in just a second.

The Secretary of State spoke about the need to give investors protection and security and he has boasted many times in the past 12 months about the record number of FDI deals that he has been able to achieve. Unaccountably, he failed to report that those deals, though record in number, showed a 92% drop in value. Today’s figures also reveal a drop in the number of deals, and the number of jobs saved by such investments is down by 54% year on year, according to his website.

Indeed, many Canadian companies have used investor-state dispute provisions in trade agreements to challenge foreign Governments, whether it has been the closing down of mines in El Salvador following a moratorium, to protect unpolluted drinking water, or the Obama Administration’s decision to suspend the Keystone pipeline over concerns about potential damage to the environment. The very threat of facing such a case, even when the chance of winning is in the Government’s favour, can clearly act as a deterrent to Governments from pursuing actions in the public interest—a regulatory chilling effect. This may well have been President Trump’s view when he reversed his predecessor’s decision and greenlit the Keystone pipeline, thus avoiding costly legal action and the chance of a substantial payout.

Having watched cases taken against the Uruguayan and Australian Governments by the tobacco giant, Philip Morris, many countries are cautious about introducing plain packaging in tobacco product laws. It is not just European Governments who have expressed concerns about ISDS.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am slightly puzzled by the hon. Gentleman. At the moment, there is talk about the provisional application of CETA. What situation would he want with CETA? I know that he has reservations—if I have reservations about a car I am going to buy, I do not buy it. He has reservations about CETA, so would he not apply CETA? Would he provisionally apply it? What would his position on CETA be if he were the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade in a few months’ time?

Barry Gardiner: I did answer that question earlier following an intervention. There are many aspects of this trade agreement that we would welcome and would wish to pursue, but we cannot—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman face the Chair? We cannot hear otherwise.

Barry Gardiner: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are many aspects of the deal that we would welcome, but there are elements of it that are absolutely unsustainable and constitute red lines. South Africa, India and New Zealand have all stated their opposition to ISDS procedures, and New Zealand has gone so far as to sign side letters with five counter-signatories to the Trans-Pacific Partnership disapplying the ISDS provisions included in that agreement. The current impasse in the renegotiation of the North American free trade agreement hinges on US demands to drop ISDS provisions from the revised agreement, the rationale being that their respective domestic court systems are perfectly capable of adequately settling any disputes. Indeed, if our courts are sufficient for British companies, why should they not be considered so for foreign investors, too? The United Kingdom has long been considered a safe legal system, and a significant proportion of global trade is governed by legal—

Andrew Percy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The shadow Secretary of State has now spoken for longer than the Secretary of State. Many Back Benchers are waiting to get in on this important debate. Is he still in order?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Member for Brent North is still in order, but I point out that a lot of speakers want to come in. I am sure that he will bring his remarks to an end very shortly.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Indeed—I will respect your decision and, in that regard, I hope that nobody else will seek to intervene as I conclude my remarks.

Owen Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important that the hon. Member for Brent North is heard with politeness, because I know that he wants to bring his remarks to an end fairly quickly. I think we should give him the chance to get on and do that.

Barry Gardiner: Over the past few years, the Government have entirely failed to explain why British taxpayers should be on the hook for ordinary commercial risks faced by foreign investors. If a company has concerns about the stability of the regulatory environment, it should factor that into its investment decision. Recognising
Barry Gardiner: The real abuse is the way the Secretary of State has ignored all the waivers he has been given by the European Scrutiny Committee and all the assurances he gave that he would try to secure this debate on the Floor of the House before it became meaningless. The real abuse is the way he has conducted this whole saga over the past two years.

A Labour Government would have demanded better protections for jobs and workers’ rights. The Government’s failure to seek protections for British workers is matched by their failure to seek protections for British businesses.

Owen Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Owen Smith: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sure that the whole House is enjoying his exhaustive speech as much as me, particularly his looking through the parliamentary entrails of this issue. For clarity, is his position and that of our party now that we believe we could strike a better deal than the EU27 as a standalone nation after Brexit?

Barry Gardiner: Indeed I do. We actually said so in our manifesto. We made that clear in the manifesto that both my hon. Friend and I stood on and with which we went to the voters of this country, and he was elected on it just as I was. I propose to stand by it; I am not sure if he does.

For all these reasons, the Opposition cannot support the Government’s motion.

Dr Fox: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hesitate to raise this point of order, but in response—or non-response—to a series of interventions, the shadow Secretary of State promised the House that before he sat down he would make it clear whether he believed the Labour party would vote to ratify the agreement or lay it just as I was. I propose to stand by it; I am not sure if he does.

For all these reasons, the Opposition cannot support the Government’s motion.

Owen Smith: Indeed, my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sure that the whole House is enjoying his exhaustive speech as much as me, particularly his looking through the parliamentary entrails of this issue. For clarity, is his position and that of our party now that we believe we could strike a better deal than the EU27 as a standalone nation after Brexit?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is a matter of debate, not a point of order. I am sure that the shadow Secretary of State would intervene if he felt so inclined.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. With so many people wanting to speak, I must impose an immediate four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.55 pm

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I rise to speak very much in favour of ratifying this agreement, and I welcome the opportunity to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, and to record my thanks to him for doing so much good work in the last two years to establish the Department for International Trade. I also thank the superb officials at the Department, who have worked tirelessly to get our independent trade policy up and running and heading in a successful direction. I also congratulate my successor as Minister for Trade Policy, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), who I think will be leading the next debate. I welcome him to his position

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may believe that the hon. Gentleman is drawing his remarks to a close, but I can see his notes. Is it not completely against convention and the good manners that are conducive to proper parliamentary debate for the hon. Gentleman to so abuse the conventions of the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I must insist that the hon. Gentleman be heard out. I am sure he will bring his remarks to a close in the next minute.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed I do. We actually said so in our manifesto. We made that clear in the manifesto that both my hon. Friend and I stood on and with which we went to the voters of this country, and he was elected on it just as I was. I propose to stand by it; I am not sure if he does.

Owen Smith: Indeed I do. We actually said so in our manifesto. We made that clear in the manifesto that both my hon. Friend and I stood on and with which we went to the voters of this country, and he was elected on it just as I was. I propose to stand by it; I am not sure if he does.

For all these reasons, the Opposition cannot support the Government’s motion.

Owen Smith: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sure that the whole House is enjoying his exhaustive speech as much as me, particularly his looking through the parliamentary entrails of this issue. For clarity, is his position and that of our party now that we believe we could strike a better deal than the EU27 as a standalone nation after Brexit?

Barry Gardiner: Indeed I do. We actually said so in our manifesto. We made that clear in the manifesto that both my hon. Friend and I stood on and with which we went to the voters of this country, and he was elected on it just as I was. I propose to stand by it; I am not sure if he does.

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and wish him every good fortune in his important role, in which he has a lot coming up in the next couple of weeks.

I want to reflect on the extraordinary contribution by the shadow Secretary of State. It was an abuse of procedure to speak for 35 minutes in a 90-minute statutory instrument debate and to leave others, who actually want to speak about the content of the agreement and its implications, with just four minutes each. I listened to his explanation of what happened, or did not happen, in 2016, and I thought it not really in his interests, as we could also go back to his position in 2016 and 2017, when I think he said that staying in the customs union, which I believe is now his party’s policy, would be a disaster for the country. I should have thought he was the last person to want to draw attention to what people said two years ago.

Most importantly, we heard the shadow Secretary of State speak for 35 minutes but never got a straight answer as to what his position on the agreement actually is. I think he said he would like to renegotiate it. Now, not only would that have implications for an agreement that is already in place—the provisions have been in place since September—but is he also saying he would renegotiate all the other 40-plus EU agreements, rather than seek their transition into UK agreements?

I think he is saying from a sedentary position that he would like to renegotiate the whole lot.

Jen Smith rose—

Greg Hands: I will not take any interventions because there is no time.

I want to say three things. First, CETA itself, on its own merits, is a very good deal. It could be worth as much as £1.3 billion per annum to the UK economy. It removes all tariffs on industrial products and wines and spirits, and eliminates customs duties on ciders, wines and spirits. On the investment provisions, we must remember, as the Secretary of State laid out, that the UK is the fourth-largest source of investment into Canada and the UK is the second most popular destination for Canadian investment. It is also important for the EU’s trade agenda, as it will be the first EU trade agreement to be ratified since that with South Korea some six years ago. The UK is supportive of the EU’s trade agenda, partly because we believe in breaking down barriers ourselves, and partly because the UK will seek to maintain the substance of these agreements as we go forward after Brexit.

Last time around on CETA the official Opposition split three ways. We look forward to seeing what the official position of the Opposition is and what the practical position is of their various MPs.

2 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I will be as brief as possible to allow as many others in as possible. [Interruption.] I may take slightly longer than four minutes, but I will be as brief as possible.

The Secretary of State said we should take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the principles of free trade. I think we should take any opportunity to reaffirm principles in support of free and fair trade, but we are not engaged in a general debate on trade; we are engaged in a debate on a specific trade agreement—one which is incredibly important to the whole of the UK, and indeed for Scotland because of our history and record of trade with Canada.

I welcome what the Secretary of State said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), the Chair of the Select Committee—that he was sympathetic to finding other ways to engage and consult with the devolved Administrations, and indeed wider society. That is very important, particularly for Scotland, because we are a trading nation. Indeed, the most recent stats—year-end, quarter 1 of 2018—showed that Scotland’s international exports were growing at the fastest rate of any UK nation: a 12% increase over the year, compared with 8% for the UK—6.5% for England and as low as 5% growth for Northern Ireland. Scotland saw some phenomenal increases in trade—a 48% rise in exports with the Netherlands—and the Secretary of State laid out the trade increase between the UK and Canada.

So we would normally want to be able to support free and fair trade agreements that support and encourage trade, GDP growth, productivity growth and jobs. But trade agreements need to be properly scrutinised and debated, and to contain necessary protections to ensure that our vital public services are protected now and into the future, and there are two aspects of this CETA treaty that we must take issue with and probe. There has not been time to scrutinise it properly, and one might argue that that is now par for the course for this Government, not least in the way that they treat this Parliament. Indeed, in October 2016, the Secretary of State had to apologise to the European Scrutiny Committee after failing to make time for a debate on CETA before the decision was made in the Council by the UK Government to support it, and since then, although there have been outings in Committee, Westminster Hall and oral questions, there has been nothing substantive on the Floor of the House. It is also a disgrace that the Scottish Parliament has not been given any formal role in the negotiation process, particularly when we saw the input of the Canadian provinces and sub-state Parliaments in the EU.

Despite this lack of scrutiny, however, the UK is subject to all the rights and obligations arising from CETA while it remains in the EU, it will be bound by its obligations during the transitional period, and the UK Government’s aim is to roll over the EU trade agreements into an equivalent UK third-party agreement post the Brexit transition. It is therefore all the more important that there is proper scrutiny both in this House and the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies.

We also have concerns that CETA fails to properly secure key protections for Scottish, and UK, public services. According to a note prepared for the European Parliament—the Secretary of State alluded to this today—public services are excluded from CETA, including health, education and other social services. But the counter-argument notes that negotiators have used the so-called negative list approach, which means that all services are open to market liberalisation unless a specific and accurate reservation is entered, at the outset. That can, of course, lead to the creeping liberalisation of public services, as negotiators have failed to include sufficiently watertight exclusions.
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[Stewart Hosie]

I am conscious that time is short, so I will end with two quotes. I heard very clearly what the Secretary of State had to say about protections, but Friends of the Earth has said—I am grateful to the Library for this—that the CETA proposals,

“offer no significant improvement to the dangerous”

investor-state dispute resolution agreement

“and should fool no-one”,

and that the new or renamed

“Investment Court System is nothing but private arbitration under another name”.

The Corporate Europe Observatory and others summed up their objections in this regard by saying that

“it would empower thousands of companies to circumvent national legal systems and sue governments in parallel tribunals if laws and regulations undercut their ability to make money.”

The very fact that those strongly worded critiques exist and run counter to what the Secretary of State says tells me and my party that there is not sufficient clarity or certainty that the protection for our public services is fully and properly in place in this agreement.

2.5 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of this excellent trade deal between the EU and Canada, and in so doing I want to pick the shadow Secretary of State up on a number of points that he made in his interesting—and somewhat bizarre at times—comments. I like him personally—he is a jolly decent chap—but I am afraid his position on this is completely and utterly incoherent. The idea that he would oppose this deal while also trying to negotiate a new UK-Canada trade deal effectively puts him in the same boat as President Trump, in that he would immediately, by rejecting this deal, presumably reimpose the tariffs that have gone as part of the initial application of CETA. My question to him is: what would he say to British producers? I am thinking of companies like Isle of Harris Gin, whose launch I attended in Toronto in October, and which very successfully got into the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the second biggest purchaser of alcohol—

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Andrew Percy: I am not going to give way, as time is very limited. I know that concerns the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but he has intervened a number of times.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) would impose tariffs in such areas immediately, damaging British interests now. Moreover, he fails to understand the position of the Canadian Government. Their position is that CETA will be the basis of the future UK-Canada trade deal. That is the position not only of Prime Minister Trudeau but of the Canadian Opposition leader Andrew Scheer, who was here and met the Secretary of State only a few months ago. So the hon. Gentleman would rip up a deal that the Canadian side in good faith wants to use as the basis of a trade deal. I am afraid the hon. Gentleman’s position is total nonsense and would be hugely damaging to those British producers who are already benefiting from the initial application of these provisions.

I also want to say something about the current environment in Canada based on what I find when I make my visits out there and also welcome Canadians here. There is massive support for this agreement in Canada, which leads into huge support for a seamless transition into a UK-Canada trade deal, because Canada recognises that, particularly in terms of public procurement, there are specific skills that this country has that are needed to make good on some of Canada’s infrastructure investment plans. In my earlier intervention I mentioned that there are £20 billion-worth of infrastructure contracts up for grabs in the greater Toronto area alone. This treaty makes it much easier for British companies to gain access to them. So the opportunities for UK companies in Canada are huge under this agreement.

On where we should go in the future, the Secretary of State rightly said that this is a good deal but we can do better, although this must of course be the basis of a future UK-Canada deal. There are two areas in particular where we should be more ambitious. First, services is a hugely important area of our economy, and we have a great deal in common with Canada in terms of services, but there are barriers at present that are not dealt with as part of the agreement, and which we would wish to see improved in a future deal. Similarly, CETA does some good things on labour mobility, but there is more that we can and should look to do with Canada in the future on the ability of companies to move people between the two economies.

Finally, I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to working with the devolved Administrations here. That is important. We must also recognise in our future negotiations with Canada the important role that Canadian provinces will play. I met with the Quebec negotiator Pierre Marc Johnson in Montreal just a few weeks ago. There is big support in the provinces for a UK-Canada deal, but we must engage with them at an early stage to ensure that remains the case.

2.9 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on transatlantic trade. Also, like many of my constituents and many colleagues here, I have family in Canada. I will shorten what I was going to say about our strong links to Canada, but I want to stress our shared history, culture and institutions, both national and international. Also, we have heard about Canada’s Liberal Government, whose Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has been trashed by Team Trump. So, what’s not to like?

The question we have to ask is: if not Canada, who? We will obviously be discussing trade relations with the EU, but that will not be an easy discussion and it will take some time. Obviously, in the future we will rightly have to do a trade deal with the United States, but at the moment, given that it is pulling back from TTIP and NAFTA, and that it has shut down discussions on the TPP, and with the tariff wars extending, this is not the best environment in which to have those discussions.

Discussions with China will need to focus on addressing China’s trade-distorting practices, which are a threat to the multilateral system, as we have heard from the European Trade Union Confederation and the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations in the United States. We shall be discussing
Japan in a few minutes, but it too is a mature democracy and very effective trading partner. It is a big investor in the UK, and a country with which we ought to be doing a trade deal as part of the world trading order. So I say again: if not Canada, who? I suppose we could do a trade deal with Venezuela, but it might not meet the human rights hurdle any time soon.

What have the underlying problems been? I can give the House two examples. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) drew our attention to the investor-state dispute settlement provisions, which have caused great concern, but he conceded that over several decades, and with nearly 100 agreements containing ISDS provisions, there have been four cases against the United Kingdom and we lost none of them. Such arrangements are worth looking at, between two trading blocs with mature legal systems, but we seem to be making a mountain out of a molehill.

Secondly, the underlying problem with CETA is that it was seen as the son of TTIP, the transatlantic trade deal to which opposition built up over a period of time—having initially had considerable support in, for example, the progressive areas of the trade union movement—particularly on the basis of anti-Americanism. My hon. Friend mentioned public concern from civil society, by which I think he meant non-governmental organisations. Any study will show the way in which this has been orchestrated, particularly by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the foundation of the German left party, Die Linke, which grew out of the old East German Communist party.

In conclusion, this agreement is certainly to be welcomed, in order to strengthen the bonds between our two great nations and peoples.

2.13 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I apologise in advance if my speech is rather chopped up. Unfortunately, due to the huge discourtesy that the shadow Front-Bench spokesman displayed to the House, I shall have to heavily curtail the points that I wished to make. In a paper that I co-wrote with Tim Hewish entitled “Reconnecting with the Commonwealth: the UK’s free trade opportunities”, I made the point that because of our shared history, our common language, our basis in common law, our shared recognition of professional standards and our shared attitude towards human rights and standards in general, a trade agreement with Canada should be one of this country’s priorities, post-Brexit. I am therefore pleased to have heard from both sides of the Atlantic that CETA will be the foundation stone for a UK-Canada trade agreement, post-Brexit, and it is appropriate and welcome that this House should be debating this issue today.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) suggested earlier from a sedentary position that the UK was a minnow. I think that that was the word he used. Well, I have news for him. In 2016, this particular minnow had exports combined to a value of £8.3 billion—up by £2.1 billion on the preceding decade. In 2016-17, there were 72 foreign direct investment projects from Canada to the UK, accounting for something in the region of 1,700 jobs.

Geraint Davies: But the hon. Gentleman mentioned me—

James Cleverly: I am not giving way. We have so little time.

CETA is the first major trade agreement signed by the EU since the one with South Korea in 2011. It is therefore entirely appropriate to welcome its arrival. This morning, I had breakfast with Stephen Harper, the former Prime Minister of Canada. He reinforced the point made by Canada’s current Prime Minister, who has said that a UK-Canada trade agreement would allow a larger and—this is a Canadianism rather than a British turn of phrase—“more impactful” trade relationship than the current EU agreement. Just this week, we have heard reports that Italy is now expressing concerns about the ratification of CETA.

This debate provides us with an opportunity to welcome CETA and the work that our own Department for International Trade, led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, has done to forge relationships between the UK and Canada, and more widely. Most importantly, it gives us the opportunity to be vocal and passionate proponents of free trade and the good work that it does. We must not be tempted by the siren song of protectionism. We remember from Greek mythology what happened to those who were seduced by the song of the sirens: they sailed on to the rocks and their ships were dashed to pieces. They floundered and drowned. We must not let that happen to us. We must embrace free trade and we must welcome the CETA agreement.

2.17 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): We on the International Trade Committee took time to hear evidence on the Canada trade deal. In his near-40-minute speech from the Front Bench today, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) covered a number of important points about parliamentary scrutiny, but I am not entirely clear what those on my Front Bench are going to do if this issue comes to a vote. I shall therefore make my own mind up, based on the debate that we are having. From what I can see, CETA is quite a decent trade deal. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, Canada is a liberal, open economy with which we have a great affinity.

A number of improvements have been made to the agreement along the way as part of the negotiations. The old ISDS has gone, and there is a new, more transparent and open arrangement for settling disputes. By the way, trade deals tend to need some sort of mechanism for settling disputes. Most importantly, CETA is already provisionally in force. So, if for some reason the House were to kick it out today, and possibly sanction our participation in the treaty, we would go from a position in which we currently enjoy zero tariffs to one in which tariffs would again be imposed on a whole basket of goods. For example, the UK currently enjoys zero tariffs on clothing and textiles, but they would have to go back up to 16%. The tariffs on vehicles and machinery would go back up to 9.5%, those on medical devices would go back up to 8% and those on chemicals would go back up to 6.5%. We have to look responsibly at the options before the House today.
At this time in particular, when we are talking about Brexit and when our access to our largest markets across the European Union, 40% of our trade, is in a somewhat precarious situation—I do not want to open that particular debate up more widely just now—to start putting question marks over the non-EU trade deals, 30% of our trade, does not seem very sensible. As we are potentially at the brink of a worldwide trade war, with Trump and the Americans' ridiculous approach of irrational tariffs on a whole series of goods, this is not the time for us to step away from free and fair trade arrangements.

All I would say to my colleagues on the Front Bench is to be very careful about slipping into an oppositionalist rut on these issues. If we want to be a Government in waiting, we sometimes have to weigh things in the balance and take a responsible view about the prosperity of our economy, because from that prosperity comes the revenue we need for our public services, our health service, our schools, and all those local council services. There is danger in flirting with anti-trade populism. Yes, we must harness globalisation, but we must not resist it entirely. There is a sensible mainstream, dare I say it centre-ground approach to being rational and sensible about trade deals. Yes, make the points about parliamentary scrutiny, but at the end of the day we have to take the long view, which is that free and fair trade benefits us all.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I shall keep my remarks very brief to allow others in.

On issues such as this, I like to ask what the opportunity cost is of not proceeding. It is very easy to find reasons not to do something: perhaps as a country, we do that too often. If we were to take the advice of the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), go down the contortions of his suggested route and not ratify this treaty, what opportunities will be lost? What investments will not be made, what deals would not be done and what jobs will not be created? We already have strong links between Canada and the United Kingdom. There is a huge appetite among Canadian investors to invest in the critical national infrastructure projects we want delivered in this country. They might be imperilled if we do not ratify this agreement. This is a good deal, paving the way for an even better post-Brexit bilateral deal. Let us get on with it.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I want to speak briefly to put on record my support and that of the Democratic Unionist party for the motion and the proposed route forward. Ensuring a strong British economy necessitates a continued and growing role for the United Kingdom in international trade. Northern Ireland already plays a strong part in the overall UK trading picture, and we too want to improve and enhance what we do. We are potential partners in global Britain—or, may I suggest, a global UK agenda? Northern Ireland already has strong links with Canada, including strong business connections. We want to protect and build on that: more investment, more jobs, and more and enhanced trading relationships. That is why I welcome CETA and today’s proposals.

As been indicated, this measure has already been provisionally implemented and it is entirely logical for us to agree with it today. As this rolls on with UK-EU third-party transitional arrangements, we can address the issues and people’s concerns as well as enhance the opportunities that it might present.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Britain should and must be a champion of free trade. Free trade, the great driver of prosperity, is in the interests of our constituents and has taken 1 billion people out of poverty around the world. Now more than ever, when protectionism is rearing its head—in fact, when it is being trumpeted in parts of the world—we should send a message to the world that we will not follow that lead but will be champions of free trade.

I am afraid that the shadow Secretary of State did not send that message. He said that he would support this—"but". The substance of that “but” was based on his airtime. I think that it was mostly to do with the process and that he did not like the fact that he had not been invited to the party—perhaps that he had not had his chance to pass the parcel around. I would say that he is better than that. He should take a step back, as I know some of his colleagues are. Some Members sitting behind him are for free trade. They are for British businesses. They are for British consumers. They are not looking to fuel scaremongering fires, as he did. They recognise that this deal will not water down labour rights; on the contrary, it protects them. It will not water down environmental protections; on the contrary, it protects them. It will not be harmful to public services, as it protects them, too. Those risks do not exist, so the order is in the interest of our constituents and we should support it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Geraint Davies. You have 45 seconds.
Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Canada Trade Agreement) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just wanted to come to the House at the earliest opportunity to correct something I stated in oral questions that was factually inaccurate. In response to a question on Turkey, I said that in her call with President Erdoğan yesterday my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had specifically raised the issue of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe monitoring mission. I have since learned that this was not mentioned in the way I described, and I wish to correct the record and apologise for inadvertently misinforming the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for giving me notice of his point of order and for correcting the record. I am sure the House will appreciate that he has done so at the earliest opportunity.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 7959/18 and Addenda 1 to 11, Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, of the Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Japan; and European Union Document No. 7960/18 and Addenda 1 to 11, Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Japan; and welcomes the proposed signature and conclusion of the agreement.

I am delighted to be here today to debate the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement, although I confess it feels slightly peculiar to be standing here and speaking to the House after three years of silence. The agreement is broad and ambitious, offering excellent opportunities to the UK. The Government have long supported the EPA, and I welcome the opportunity today to set this out in my new role. However, let me first take a moment to thank my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), for all his works as the Minister for Trade Policy and indeed for his kinds words in the previous debate. He did an excellent job in promoting UK businesses around the world and shaping our future independent trade policy—I very much recognise that I have large shoes to fill.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the Minister just give us a list of his achievements?

George Hollingbery: I am not entirely sure whether the right hon. Gentleman is talking about my achievements or those of my right hon. Friend. [ Interruption. ] The establishment, in conjunction with the Secretary of State, of a brand new Department for International Trade and preparing ourselves for Brexit is evidence in itself—I could list a great many things.

The Government have an overarching commitment to free trade—

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): With all due respect to his predecessor, does the Minister accept that there has been no firming up of deals with third countries that we are assured will continue? Furthermore, South Korea, Chile and Australia have already said that they want to renegotiate their deals, so we have been left in a state of uncertainty and without any deals.

George Hollingbery: The fact is that the previous Minister was engaged, as was I, in a great many lines of negotiation with countries that have agreement with the EU. Progress is being made and will continue to be made under this Administration.

The Government have an overarching commitment to free trade, which is a fantastic and progressive means of stimulating economic growth, creating jobs and providing
greater consumer choice. The UK has been, and will continue to be, a leading voice in support of free trade globally. We will continue to support the EU’s ambitious trade agenda while we remain an EU member state. As I have just illustrated, this includes some 40 trade agreements, including the EPA with Japan, which we are talking about today. Ongoing UK support for these agreements, including in respect of signature and conclusion of the Japan agreement in July, will send a positive message about our commitment to global free trade, now and as we prepare to leave the EU.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Japan has thrived on globalisation and remains one of the most dominant economies in the world. Notwithstanding an ageing population, it has done so without a reliance on large-scale immigration. There is a lesson there, is there not?

George Hollingbery: I think it would be unwise of me to stray into the areas governed by the Home Office, but I will say that in some of the items agreed in this deal, among which is the transferability of labour across borders, Britain’s right to regulate its immigration processes is clearly protected. I should leave that there.

We will continue to support the EU’s ambitious trade agenda while we remain an EU member state. This includes some 40 trade agreements, including the EPA with Japan. Ongoing UK support for these agreements—I recognise that I am repeating myself and I apologise to the House—will send a positive message about our commitment to global free trade, now and as we prepare to leave the EU.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

George Hollingbery: I will, but I might even start that bit again.

Catherine McKinnell: The north-east is home to 50 Japanese firms, including Nissan and Hitachi, and has a long history of doing business with Japan, with many thousands of good jobs in my region relying on Japanese investment. Does the Minister share serious concerns about the future of that relationship, given warnings by the Japanese ambassador that firms could seek to move investment and thousands of jobs elsewhere as a result of the UK leaving the single market and the customs union?

George Hollingbery: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I should point out that there have been a number of large-scale investments by Japanese companies in the UK. Toyota, Nissan and Honda have all recently made large-scale investments. Furthermore, the trade deal that has been negotiated includes increasing access for supply chain elements to the automotive market into Japan in a way in which it has not hitherto been accessible. We should always remember that there are small businesses that will have access to the market that did not realistically have that access before.

Hon. Members will have seen from the Government’s detailed and comprehensive impact assessment that the EPA is estimated to be worth up to £3 billion to UK GDP annually in the long run. UK imports are due to grow by up to £8.4 billion per year in the long run, which reflects reduced input costs for British businesses, which in turn are expected to lower prices for consumers. UK exports will increase by up to £5.4 billion, with the largest gains in the chemicals and automotive sectors.

Geraint Davies: Does the Minister accept that when we technically exit in March there will be no legal obligation for Japan to keep us in this trade agreement, and that after the transition period we certainly will not be in it? There is every risk we will be out in the cold. That just shows we are better negotiating as part of team EU.

George Hollingbery: Clearly, all sorts of scenarios are possible, but the hon. Gentleman will also know that a piece of legislation is coming to this House shortly that lays the framework to ensure that we can continue those arrangements. As I have already said, efforts are ongoing across the piece to go around those 40 organisations and 70 countries with which we already have agreements such that we can continue them after exit.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Has the Minister tried to find out whether those countries we want to continue to have trade agreements with will want to continue them in the way we want them to do? It seems that there is a good opportunity for these countries to come back wanting much better terms for themselves.

George Hollingbery: The hon. Lady will know that I have had a relatively short time in this post and I have not visited any of those countries she mentions, but a great many efforts have been made. The Secretary of State will attest to the fact that we have visited all of them and they have all demonstrated a willingness to continue the arrangements that we currently have.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new duties. Does he agree that given the scale of Japanese investment in this country, and the fact that Japan likes doing trade with us and we like doing trade with it, it is unthinkable that it would not want to reach a trade agreement with us?

George Hollingbery: Evidently, that is the case, because we are here today discussing exactly that, and there can be no reason to think that that position would not continue beyond Brexit.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, which recommended that this issue be debated on the Floor of the House, I thank the Government very much on the Committee’s behalf for agreeing to that. It demonstrates that this House of Commons does debate and, if necessary, vote on matters not behind closed doors and with full transcripts. We operate not in the way that the European Union functions but in the proper, traditional Westminster manner, with full transparency. For that reason, I congratulate the Government on holding this debate.

George Hollingbery: My hon. Friend is plainly right: we have debated this matter and are giving it further scrutiny today.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
The EU’s principled long-term ban on the import of whale products will not be lifted by the agreement, and the UK and the EU remain strongly committed to the international convention on trade in endangered species and the work of the International Whaling Commission.

The UK has a wealth of experience in producing the finest foods and drinks across all corners of the country. The agreement secures the protection of Scotch whisky, Scottish farmed salmon, Irish whiskey, Irish cream, west country farmhouse cheddar and both white and blue Stilton. I am proud that those products are safeguarded by the EPA.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his new role. He is making a strong case for this excellent EU-Japan deal, and we should embrace it. Does he agree that the UK-EU partnership that we will be looking for should be even deeper and better, especially in areas such as digital, services and common standards to facilitate our trade?

George Hollingbery: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we should seek to do the widest, deepest and most ambitious trade deal that we possibly can.

In the light of the European Court of Justice opinion on competence in the EU-Singapore FTA of May 2017, which helped to clarify the scope of the common commercial policy, the Japan EPA is to be concluded as an EU-only agreement. That means that it will fully enter into force once Japan has ratified it, should the European Council and the European Parliament support its conclusion. I am aware of the implications of this approach on the role of Parliament in the scrutiny and conclusion of the EPA, and of EU-only trade agreements going forward, because it means that ratification by Parliament is not required for an agreement to enter fully into force. I am also acutely aware of Parliament’s interest in the Government’s approach to the scrutiny of future UK trade deals and trade policy. That is one reason why I welcome the opportunity to debate the EU-Japan EPA today, as it rightly ensures that Parliament has the fullest opportunity to scrutinise the agreement, under the current EU scrutiny structure. I am pleased to be able to go beyond what is simply required ahead of signature, in line with the Government’s commitment to transparency.

Owen Smith: I, too, warmly congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. He is making an excellent speech in which he is making a powerful case for the EU-Japan trade deal. I completely concur with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) about Japanese trade’s importance to our economy. Will the Minister concede that he can offer no guarantee that post Brexit we will have as good a trade deal with Japan, once we are a stand-alone trading nation?

George Hollingbery: All I can say is that the Government are extremely ambitious in what we want to achieve. We are seeking to achieve that trade deal post Brexit and hope very much that we will. Furthermore, we are pursuing that same opportunity with all the other current signatories to deals across the European Union.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest on the register and wish the Minister well in his new role. I note that the agreement between Japan
and the European Union on the free flow of data has been separated from the free trade agreement. Will the Minister give the House a commitment that we will have the opportunity both to debate the data trade agreement that the EU and Japan wish to negotiate and to explore the opportunities and risks for the UK as part of the Brexit process?

**George Hollingbery:** It was not possible in putting together this agreement to reach the agreement that we wished for on data. The discussion between the two countries on that is still ongoing, and I have no doubt that the matter will come back to the House in due course.

My Department will continue to work with the European scrutiny Committees to identify appropriate ways to ensure the thorough scrutiny of similar EU-only free trade agreements while the UK remains a member state. The Government are considering the legislative framework for future trade agreements, but they are committed to ensuring that Parliament will have a crucial role to play in the scrutiny and ratification of the UK’s future trade deals when we bring forward proposals in due course.

The EU and UK agreed at the European Council in March that international agreements to which the UK is party by virtue of its EU membership—including, at the time of exit, the EU-Japan EPA—should continue to apply to the UK during the implementation period. Text to that effect was agreed in the draft withdrawal agreement. We continue to advance our dialogue with the Japanese Government on the shape of our future bilateral trade and investment relationship, which will come into effect after the implementation period, and I look forward to making progress as we continue to foster our post-Brexit relationship with the Japanese.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his speech and his appointment. On his point about the trade arrangements rolling over to the post-Brexit period, will he remind the House that we were told by the Opposition that that would never be possible—that we would never be able to agree that with the European Union and it absolutely would not happen? But of course the Prime Minister has delivered that.

**George Hollingbery:** Indeed, my hon. Friend is plainly right.

As Members will know, in August 2017, the Prime Minister and the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, agreed to

“work quickly to establish a new economic partnership between Japan and the UK based on the final terms of the EPA”

as the UK leaves the EU. The UK-Japan trade and investment working group, established last year by the Japan-UK joint declaration on prosperity co-operation, is tasked to deliver on that commitment, and it met for the first time in May.

**George Hollingbery:** As the hon. Lady will know, this is not part of the current agreement because, at this stage, there was not agreement between the two parties on how it should work—it is not because it could and would not work because neither party would agree to it. Therefore, I cannot give her the assurance that she is seeking.

To conclude, the EU-Japan EPA is an excellent agreement for the UK that will benefit UK exporters, importers and consumers. During the implementation period, the United Kingdom will seek to retain access to EU free trade agreements while gaining the right to negotiate, sign and ratify new trade agreements. Japan’s commitment to establish a new bilateral economic partnership with the UK based on the final terms of the EPA is clear.

Colleagues can rest assured that the UK will continue to be a strong advocate of free trade globally, and a defender of the multilateral rules-based system. The Government are committed to a truly global Britain as we leave the EU, where we seize the opportunity to engage with partners around the world in the shared pursuit of prosperity and security. As to future scrutiny arrangements, the Government are clear that Parliament will have a crucial role to play in the scrutiny and ratification of the UK’s future trade deals, and proposals on this will come forward in due course.

The EU-Japan EPA has a positive role to play for the UK, the wider EU and global free trade in general. I look forward to the UK demonstrating our support for the agreement when Council adopts decisions on conclusion and signature, and I urge hon. Members to support the Government’s motion to that effect today.

3.1 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister for Trade Policy to his new post. I am delighted to have him opposite us at the Dispatch Box. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for the work that he did in this Department. We had many valuable exchanges in Committee and on the Floor of the House and he always dealt with them with exceptional good humour. I am sure that he will return to the Front Bench at a later stage and I look forward to that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate to set out our position on the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement. The relationship with Japan is, as many have said, of enormous importance, and we on the Labour Benches want to ensure that our future co-operation boosts trade and jobs in both our economies.

Exports make up 30% of our national economic output, and we celebrate the jobs and the myriad other benefits that come from international trade. No country exemplifies the importance of foreign investment to our economy more than Japan. It is Japanese companies that have chosen to invest billions in the manufacturing capital of this country over many decades, and with that investment has come jobs—good jobs, skilled jobs. Some 7,000 are directly employed by Toyota, with 7,000 directly employed by Nissan, and 3,400 directly employed by Honda. We could double those figures when we factor in the indirect employment in the UK that comes from these companies—the manufacturers of parts that go into their supply chain and the logistics companies that ensure their just-in-time delivery systems.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the investor-state dispute settlement has been excluded from the deal because of the widespread public outcry against it? Will he assure the House that his Government will not seek to include ISDS in any future deal with Japan?
I was at Honda a week ago last Friday speaking both with the unions and the management in Swindon. A new car rolls off its production line every 69 seconds, and its just-in-time supply chain is critical to that performance. That is why workers at that plant were telling me of their strong support for Labour’s position on a new customs union that would stop disruption to that supply chain and why they cannot understand the Government’s red line that there should be no such customs union after we leave the EU.

The Government have put our trading relationship with Japan under enormous strain because of their disorganised approach to Brexit. Companies such as Honda will speak for themselves, but many working there cannot understand why the Government are taking such a risk with their livelihoods. Japan is one of our key export partners. It accounted for £12.5 billion of our exports in 2016.

**John Spellar:** Before my hon. Friend moves on from his comments about Japanese companies in the UK, will he join me in commending the very long-term view that those Japanese companies take? They invest significantly not only in capital equipment, but in their staff and their continuous training programmes, all of which have been an example that, I am pleased to say, has now been followed by many British companies.

**Barry Gardiner:** Indeed. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. The Japanese investment into our country over many, many years has been hugely beneficial not simply in creating those jobs, but in sustaining them into the future. We absolutely cannot afford the Government’s red line, which puts that in jeopardy.

As I was saying, Japan accounted for £12.5 billion of our exports in 2016—it was our fifth largest export market. A Labour Government would certainly want to do a trade deal that builds on the commercial and diplomatic ties that bind our two countries together. The Government have been forced into calling this debate by the European Scrutiny Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). The Committee rightly said that the agreement raised “complex legal and policy issues for the UK”, which remain unanswered.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): On a point of clarification, I think that it is the official position of the hon. Gentleman’s party—I am not sure whether he is fully signed up to it—that it would remain part of the customs union after leaving the European Union, which would inhibit his chances of striking a free trade deal anywhere, as the EU would be required to negotiate that deal on his behalf. Bearing in mind his reservations about the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement discussed in the previous debate, and his potential reservations in this debate, is he confident that the EU will negotiate those trade deals to his satisfaction?

**Barry Gardiner:** Clearly, while we remain a member of the EU, we have a seat at the negotiating table of any deals. If we are outside the EU, we will not have that, but, equally, we will not have the benefit of being part of a 500 million-strong consumer market that would enable us to negotiate better deals. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that being in a new customs union with the EU, as the leader of my party set out in a speech he gave in Coventry a little while ago, would mean that we would be co-decision makers with the EU in that relationship—a customs union not such as the one we currently have with the EU, but one much more like Mercosur, where each of the countries has equal sway.

**Sir William Cash** rose—

**Barry Gardiner:** I will make a little progress and then, of course, I will very happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, because his Committee has raised a number of questions on the EU-Japan deal that we need to explore further. The Committee insisted, in fact, that the Government bring the deal to a debate on the Floor of the House before the EU Council. Interestingly, in the light of the absurdly tight timeframe that the Government imposed on themselves, the Committee also instructed them to publish their impact assessment on the EU-Japan EPA no later than 4 June.

The first question that the Minister must answer then is why the Government failed to meet that deadline. The impact assessment was published a week late, on 11 June, on the same day that this debate was announced. It is an extraordinary document. Its own authors openly acknowledge that the assessment cannot be taken as an accurate guide to the future impacts of the agreement. It failed to calculate the specific effects on individual EU member states. The assessment admits that it cannot know what proportion of any aggregate gains from the EU-Japan EPA might come to the UK or to any other EU member state. There has been no proper independent assessment of the impacts on the UK, and the authors—these are the authors of the assessment—say that they have just had to assume proportionate outcomes in line with the UK’s projected share of EU trade with Japan.

**Sir William Cash:** I thought I might try to lift this enormous pile of documents to show the House what we are actually considering today; it is quite formidable. I want to make one point regarding the single market. Does the hon. Gentleman deny that, in relation to our trade with the other 27 member states, we run a deficit of £82 billion a year—these are figures from the Office for National Statistics—whereas our external growth, our external surplus, is growing exponentially and, of course, 90% of all future trading will be outside the EU?

**Barry Gardiner:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman on two counts—first for showing us precisely what we are talking about. I know that he will have read the full EPA assessment, as I have done. I am equally grateful to him for raising the issue of the balance of trade surplus and deficit that we currently run. I am just about to come to that point, so I hope that he can hold off with his remarks.

It is perhaps most damming to quote from the impact assessment document itself, which states:

“Figures presented here reflect the long run impacts per annum and should be treated as a magnitude of change and not a forecast...It is important to note the results below are not based on the final EU-Japan EPA text and are therefore subject to a
degree of uncertainty...Estimates are produced against a baseline of 2008 and reflect a world in which the Doha trade round and EU-Korea FTA are un-concluded.”

So there we have it. The baseline is 10 years out of date and fails to take account not only of the EU-South Korea FTA, which has been applied ever since July 2011—seven years ago—but of the terms of the final agreement text that it is supposed to be assessing.

The European Scrutiny Committee was absolutely right to demand in its report “a clear breakdown of how different UK sectors and stakeholders are expected to win or lose from the agreement.”

All the independent projections made of the EU-Japan deal calculated that the gains accruing to Japanese firms would be far higher than those seen by European businesses. All the forecasts spoke of major increases in Japanese exports, and the potential loss of jobs and businesses in Europe as a result. The Government assessment has at least picked up on these forecasts, recognising that the UK’s balance of trade with Japan will take a serious hit when this agreement comes into force. Voting to approve this motion will allow the Government to rush ahead and sign a deal that the Government to fast-track approval of this trade deal when we have not had answers to the critical questions posed by the hon. Member for Stone and his Committee, based on a proper analysis of what the likely impacts might be.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether my hon. Friend could help me out, because the Opposition are very keen to get to the denouement of this particular question. It feels to me as though he is raising some issues of concern. But, by and large, this is quite a positive deal for the UK, the EU and Japan. Is he saying that we should oppose the motion before the House?

Barry Gardiner: I am astonished. I should have thought that each week my hon. Friend reads—just as I do—the paper Whip in front of me at the moment, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would you encourage my hon. Friend to speak?

Mr Leslie: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I hope that this is a point of order.

Mr Leslie: My point is that I do not have a copy of the paper Whip in front of me at the moment, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would you encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) to share with Labour Members what our position is on this important issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is a point of debate. I want the debate to move on because a lot of Members wish to speak.

Barry Gardiner: The Government have not published any serious analysis as to the potential outcomes of the EU-Japan EPA on the car industry beyond the basic econometric analysis in their impact assessment. It cannot be right to allow the Government to proceed with fast-tracking approval of this trade deal when we have not had answers to the critical questions posed by the hon. Member for Stone and his Committee, based on a proper analysis of what the likely impacts might be.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Barry Gardiner: I will not, because Madam Deputy Speaker wants me to press on to allow hon. Members to make their own contributions.

The car industry is far from the only sector involved in what is a comprehensive trade deal. Food and drink producers are also implicated, not least as regards the protection provided in the agreement for products with specific geographical indications. Once again, the Government have failed to defend the interests of British producers on overseas markets. France, Spain and Italy have each listed dozens of their national products for special protection in annex 14-B of the deal and Japan has listed 48 of its products for protection, yet the UK Government could only be bothered to list four products under the geographical indications provisions of the deal—Scottish farmed salmon, west country farmhouse cheddar, Stilton and Scotch whisky.

Geraint Davies: What about Welsh lamb?

Barry Gardiner: Indeed. As my hon. Friend says, what about Welsh lamb? What about Scotch beef, Dorset blue, Yorkshire Wensleydale, Cumberland sausage and Melton Mowbray pork pies? Can the Minister explain why we failed to register geographical indications to protect more of our UK food produce?

The European Scrutiny Committee raised many further crucial issues relating to the deal that remain unanswered. Under the negative list approach, all service sectors that are not explicitly exempted from liberalisation are included. It is considered to be a particular threat to public services, as it may prove impossible to shield them from liberalisation effectively once they have been committed to an international trade treaty. It means that any emergent sector in the future will be automatically subject to trade liberalisation even where there may be a clear need for Government regulation or intervention. We cannot possibly predict what those will be prior to their emergence, but what is the point of using such “negative lists” to reduce the capacity of the Government to regulate in the future?

Annex 1 allows countries to list existing non-conforming measures that enjoy some protection. Annex 2 is a stronger protection, in that it permits countries to protect service sectors into the future by allowing for the introduction of reforms that would otherwise contravene the EPA rules. As the Minister said, the UK has entered annex 2 reservations for cross-border auditing services, manpower planning for doctors in the NHS, privately funded ambulance services, and residential health facilities services other than hospital services. I repeat: other than hospital services. In other words, they are, and will forever remain in future, subject to liberalisation and competition under this agreement, in contradiction to the implication that we heard earlier. I therefore repeat the Committee’s question: will the Minister confirm whether he is content with the proposed provisions enabling Governments to regulate in the public sector?

Do the Government intend to negotiate the UK’s future trade partnership and its future investment relationship with Japan at the same time, as one agreement—another question posed by the hon. Member for Stone and by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich—or will the separate EU-only trade agreement constrain the UK’s ability to negotiate and conclude an integrated trade and investment agreement?

The House will be rightly concerned that the Government have simultaneously inserted into the Trade Bill sweeping Henry VIII powers to implement such a future trade agreement without any proper scrutiny or oversight. Will the Minister confirm that no such investment chapters will be included in any future trade agreement with Japan?

Let me be clear: Labour would like to see a trade agreement with Japan. We have an incredibly strong trade and investment relationship between our two countries, and we believe that we can continue to build on that. We want a positive, dynamic relationship that elevates standards, boosts opportunities to benefit from advances in technology and research and development, and continues to support growth and investment in our high-tech manufacturing sectors and world-class services sector. But we cannot be expected to rely on this Government’s quiet promises alone, and it is imperative that Parliament has the proper opportunity to scrutinise and debate these trade agreements well in advance of their being signed.

It is worth noting that this deal has yet even to go through the full scrutiny process in the EU, with INTA—the Committee on International Trade—not scheduled to hold a public inquiry until 9 and 10 July and the European Parliament scheduled to vote on whether to give consent to the agreement in December. If the motion before us is voted through, it will allow Ministers to endorse the agreement without proper scrutiny by the House, and even before the full scrutiny process of the European Union has been properly applied. That sets a dangerous precedent for future trade agreements and makes a mockery of the idea that any future trade agreements to which the Trade Bill applies will have received proper scrutiny by this House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A large number of colleagues want to speak. I will have to put an immediate six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

3.23 pm

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): For the second time today, I have the rather dubious honour of following the shadow Secretary of State after he made what was, yet again, a most extraordinary speech. Earlier, he spoke for 40 minutes without actually telling us what the Labour Front-Bench view was on CETA. Then we discovered not long afterwards that he was abstaining in the Division, even though last year he had been against CETA. More Labour MPs have voted in favour of the provisional adoption of CETA than have voted against it. The confusion continues. In that 21-minute effort by the hon. Gentleman, I do not think we got any closer to finding whether Labour agrees with the EU-Japan EPA or not.

The hon. Gentleman came out with some extraordinary statements. I think he said that the EU or the UK would be some billions of pounds worse off as a result of the agreement. That is not what the impact assessment says, as I know because I signed off on it. The impact assessment actually says that Japanese exports to the EU will rise more quickly than Japanese imports from the EU. That is not the same as saying that anybody is going to be worse off. Trade is not a zero-sum game. He
has bizarrely moved from the position of being anti-trade agreements to having some kind of Trumpist, mercantilist view of the world. From what I could interpret from his 60 minutes of oration today, he is the living embodiment of the Trump view on trade here in the House of Commons.

The EU-Japan EPA is a very good agreement. I will speak about three aspects. First, it is a good agreement in its own right. Secondly, it is very important for current trade policy and also for our future UK trade policy. Thirdly, there is what it means for free trade generally at a time when free trade is being challenged in different parts of the world. On its entry into force, the agreement will see 91% of Japanese tariffs eliminated overnight and 97% eliminated over the long term. There will be benefits for all of the UK in this agreement, whether in chemicals, motor vehicles, agricultural products, food and drink, processed foods, beer, wine, whisky and more. All will enjoy lower tariffs.

The agreement is also very good for UK services. With trade agreements, we must always remember the importance of services to our economy. Services provide 80% of the employment in our economy and 79% of GDP. One of the best and most exciting aspects of the future UK independent trade policy is being able to do more for UK services. We are the world’s second-largest services exporter. It is estimated that the agreement could be worth up to £3 billion to the UK economy each year. We are in a good position with Japan on trade. Last year, UK exports to Japan were up by 13.3% to a total of £14.3 billion.

This agreement is important, as is the CETA agreement, for the EU’s own trade agenda and for our future UK trade agenda. After five or six years of no EU trade agreement seeing fruition, we now have CETA, the EU-Japan agreement coming on track, important agreements with Singapore and Vietnam, modernised versions with Mexico and Chile, and the possibility of agreements with Indonesia and Mercosur. These are all really important agreements and steps for the EU.

I have been to the last four of five EU Trade Council meetings. Some people might say, “Why is the UK so enthusiastic about these EU trade agreements?” The answer is briefly this: trade agreements generally are good for trade, and the UK is a passionate supporter of free trade. This also gives us the potential to take the substance of the agreements that are being negotiated at the moment to put into a future UK agreement. In my time in the role, I have found myself being the most enthusiastic for the EU’s trade agenda of all the EU 28 member states sat around that table—ironically, at a time when we are leaving. It is important to recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Minister pointed out, the two Prime Ministers recognised that the substance of this agreement will establish a new economic partnership between Japan and the UK based on the final terms of the EPA.

This agreement and other agreements like it are very important for free trade generally. We need to be breaking down barriers. Most of the new barriers to trade that have arisen in the past 10 years have come in G20 countries. This is a big agreement between the EU and the world’s third-largest economy. It is breaking down quite a few non-tariff barriers, particularly in services. This is a step in the right direction.

We look increasingly to our friends—countries such as Canada and Japan—when it comes to the debate about the importance of free trade and of the rules-based trading system. There are worrying developments in trade at the moment, such as the section 232 steel tariffs and what is going on with automobiles. Earlier today in my constituency, I bumped into John Warr of Warr’s Harley-Davidson in Fulham, and he is concerned about the potential for that trade dispute to escalate. We must never forget that trade is about real jobs, real businesses and the real livelihoods of our constituents.

3.29 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I welcome the new Minister to his place. I want to start by making an observation about trade deficits and surpluses, which seemed to get the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) into a bit of a pickle. They will not be solved by trade agreements alone, and they will not be exacerbated by trade agreements alone. They will not be resolved by general protectionism. They will be resolved, if they are deemed a problem, by Scottish companies, UK companies and EU companies making better products, marketing them better, designing them better and manufacturing them more cheaply. All trade agreements do is facilitate trade, and that is why this Japan agreement, which is mercifully free of an unacceptable investor-state dispute resolution mechanism, is very much to be welcomed.

I say that because Japan is a massively important market for Scotland. Indeed, the value of Scottish food and drink exports has surged to almost £100 million a year. Japan is Scotland’s 13th largest food and drink export market. Scotch whisky sales alone are up to some £76 million, making Japan the 14th largest global market for Scotch whisky. There are 85 businesses in Scotland with parent companies registered in Japan, with 210 local sites employing more than 6,000 people, with a turnover of £1.5 billion. That represents an increase of some 520 local employees on the 2015 figures and an additional £187 million of Scottish turnover. The more we can encourage investment from Japan into Scotland, and the more we can sell directly from Scotland, the UK and the EU to Japan, the better.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I assume that the hon. Gentleman is saying that his party is fully supportive of and enthusiastic about this deal.

Stewart Hosie: I am saying that we see absolutely nothing in the Japan deal that would cause us to vote against it, which, on balance, is a good thing.

We very much welcome this. There was a bit of a bun fight in the previous debate on CETA, but this is a much calmer affair, and it allows me to speak for far less time, which makes me very happy indeed. I agreed with much of what the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), said about global free trade. I was also very taken by the example he gave of Harley-Davidson, which is important in terms of the Japan deal and other trade deals. We have seen the US tariffs on imported steel and aluminium increase Harley-Davidson’s costs in the States by around $30 million. We have seen the reaction to President Trump’s tariffs lead to an increase in the cost of an exported Harley-Davidson to Europe of around $2.500. These tariffs in and out are bad, and they are counterproductive. I hope that people get calm quickly.
and that these things are wound back, because tariffs do not protect jobs. Tariffs destroy trade and ultimately weaken jobs. \[\text{Interuption.}\] I am glad that the Conservatives are saying that this is an excellent speech.

I am going to say that again in a different way, in the context of the Japan agreement, by quoting the Front Benchers’ favourite European, Jean-Claude Juncker. \[\text{Interuption.}\] I think the Minister for that marvellous introduction. Jean-Claude Juncker said:

“The step we are taking today paves the way for our companies and citizens to start benefiting from the full potential of the Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan already in the coming year.”

He went on to say—this is the philosophical bit where there is pretty much broad agreement, apart from the proto-Trumpian economists on the Labour Front Bench—that the agreement “sends a clear and unambiguous message that we stand together against protectionism and in defence of multilateralism. This is more important than ever.”

\[\text{Several hon. Members rose—}\]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest a speaking time limit of four minutes? I call Marcus Fysh.

3.34 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and to have heard a free trade speech from the Opposition Benches. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister. Let me also praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for his sterling work on these issues in the Department, and for his engagement with the various Committees of which I am a member.

This agreement is very important to the UK, and I support it. The total trade between Japan and the UK is worth £127 billion, and Leonardo, in my constituency, has a relationship with Kawasaki, producing helicopters, which it would like to expand. As my hon. Friend the Minister said, the Government’s impact assessment forecasts gains amounting to no less than £3 billion from the new agreement, partly as a result of increases in both imports and exports. Cheaper imports help our economy, which is one of the main reasons why we voted to leave the EU and its customs union.

After we leave the EU there will be great opportunities to improve on the Japan agreement, especially in respect of services, in which our economy has a strong interest. The Japan EPA states that world standards should be followed, and demonstrates how we can use methods of regulatory co-operation in the agreement that we make with the EU to guide, smooth and facilitate the handling of goods at our borders with it.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Given the high praise that the hon. Gentleman is heaping on the European Union, might it not be important to have some bits of paper from both the European Union and Japan saying that this relationship could continue—as he has suggested—that he would like it to—following the UK’s departure from the European Union? We would not want to find ourselves in a less advantageous position.

Mr Fysh: The hon. Gentleman has made a good point. I shall come on to those matters—by which, as he knows, I am exercised—a little later. I will say, however, that we want a good relationship with the European Union. The fact that we are leaving it does not mean that we should not have that relationship and nurture it.

The Minister rightly pointed out that the Japan deal is an “EU competence only” agreement because of the exclusion of investor-related matters. I noted his statement that the UK would seek a stand-alone investor agreement, and I should like to know a bit more about that. One of the things that concern me slightly is the legal basis that will apply as we leave the EU and, potentially, enter a transition period. In particular, I should like to know what access third parties would have to our markets under EU free trade agreements, potentially without reciprocation.

I understand that the Department has been undertaking bilateral discussions with the third parties on these matters. It is positive to hear about the bilateral agreement that we are negotiating with Japan for after we leave the EU, but I think that during the transition we shall need more clarity. Article 124 of the withdrawal agreement relies on a notification to be given by the EU that the third parties would somehow abide by the arrangement, but it is unclear to me whether that means that we will seek formal third-party confirmation, and, if that is the case, I should like to know what legal basis will apply to enforce it.

We need to caution against the uncertainty that could be extended during this process. We have article 50 running now, we have a potential transition period, and there is talk of potential backstop extensions. During all this, it is proposed that we should be effectively in the customs union and large parts of the single market, but it is unclear what the underlying legal basis would be. Clarity would be much appreciated by business. It is clear to me that no countries will want to conclude deals with us, or even start to negotiate seriously, while they think there is any chance that we will stay in a customs union with the EU, and the Government need to stand firm against any such suggestion. In my view, Labour has cynically undermined business certainty in this regard. Both importers and exporters need clarity on how this process will work.

In a customs union, not only would it no longer be possible for us to improve JEEPA, but we would have no say on our trade policy and no say on our trade defences, and the EU would be able to sell third parties access to our markets.

3.39 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh), who made a number of interesting points about the uncertainties we face. In particular, we have Brexit day in March and then a transition period, and our status within this very welcome EU-Japan deal is very uncertain.

The first key point I want to make is that we should relish the fact, as the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) essentially did, that we have been part of the EU and have had the strength of the EU to enable us to negotiate a good deal. The real fear is that, after Brexit, we will be a stand-alone country facing big opportunities but also big challenges—whether with Japan, China or Trump’s United States. That is something I very much regret.
It is good to see that we do not have an investor court system in the Japan deal. That underlines the point that such a system is simply unnecessary for trading between two mature economies in democracies with established judiciaries, because there is already protection for investors. That is the case for Canada, and also for trade with the United States, in which investors are protected. The problem with investor court systems is that they put the investor first, above the environment or the public interest. There is an endless list of examples, but—[Interjection.]
The Under-Secretary of State is chuntering from the Front Bench. By way of example, let us take George Osborne’s sugar tax. When such a tax was introduced in Mexico, such a system was used to sue Mexico for the profits lost by protecting people from diabetes, so these things do happen.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is citing the Cargill case, in which Mexico was actually fined by the World Trade Organisation for inappropriately applying tariffs that were contrary to a free trade agreement. In that case, it was ruled against not just under the investor-state dispute settlement process, but in the WTO itself.

Geraint Davies: The WTO did get involved, but the essential point—[Interruption.] No, let us get this clear. The essential point of these arbitration courts is that investors invest, and if Governments change the rules and doing so changes their future profits, investors can sue for compensation, as was the case with the sugar tax. That would be the case if there was a plastics tax, for example, or if there was a diesel tax, and so on. That is why people are very worried, and the Government must not trade off the environment, the public interest and wider considerations of public law. Thankfully, there has been concern about this in Europe, which is why such an unnecessary system has not been applied in the Japan deal.

On Japan, 40% of its inward investment into Europe is to Britain. Why? Is it because the Japanese love British people? We do speak English, which is their second language, but it is basically because we are a platform, through the customs union and the single market, into the biggest market in the world. These are the facts. If we are not in the single market and the customs union, which we will not be after the transition period—if we go ahead with the barmy negotiation that is being suggested—that foreign direct investment will go to mainland Europe, and we may just be left on our own.

This is the situation we face. In particular, as has been said, President Trump basically has an America first policy. He does not recognise anything except a zero-sum game. We have had a conversation about imports and exports.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: I will take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention in a moment.

The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who is sadly no longer with us—I mean he is not in the Chamber—has always argued that we have to get out of the EU because we have more imports than exports, yet that is the case in Japan, as has been pointed out. There is a bigger picture here, because cheaper imports are often inputs that make our products less expensive relative to elsewhere, and there is a balance in relation to foreign direct investment as well. These are complicated issues, and I do welcome the deal. I will take the intervention of the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin).

Jeremy Quin: I will allow the hon. Gentleman to continue.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Geraint Davies: Go on.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is making an absolutely fantastic speech on inputs and imports. [Interruption.] He actually is, if Members would listen to what he is saying.

The important point, which the hon. Gentleman will be aware of, is what I heard when I was in Detroit with the International Trade Committee in February. It is that the Americans are more concerned about the relationship that the UK has with the EU—and, I suspect, that we have with Japan as well—because if the companies in which they have invested find there are obstacles and their supply lines are disrupted by tariffs, border checks or whatever, that will have serious economic effects.

Geraint Davies: It is in the interest of the Americans for us to be separated, isolated and small so that we can be picked off. They obviously intend to impose their standards. They are selling more asbestos, they have lower chemical standards and lower standards of food safety—I am thinking of chlorinated chicken and so on. They will impose those standards because we will be desperate to have a deal and we face problems. We are better as part of team EU.

There are worries if we find ourselves excluded from the Japan-EU deal as we Brexit. That will include services—80% of our exports are services—and financial services. The axis of yen plus euro would be a danger to the City of London.

Captain Fox is boldly going to try to establish trade relations that no one has had before, but might find that we currently have a trade relationship that is even better. In the round, when people realise that and lose their enthusiasm for Brexit, they will realise that such trade agreements underpin the need for a public vote on the deal. When we have that, Britain will decide that it wants to stay at home in Europe.

3.45 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I support any measures that reduce tariffs, accept others’ standards and reduce non-tariff barriers. Sadly, the EU, in its usual way, has agreed to accept only international standards and has refused to accept good-quality domestic standards in Japan and elsewhere.

The economic partnership agreement is an EU-only agreement. We are discussing it today with the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), but it does not really matter to us. I tried to assist the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) in making that point. He may have problems with the deal, but in the world in which he might like to live in future, we would not be discussing the deal at all because we would be held up on the tails of a future customs union or the customs union.
It is sad that it has taken seven years to get to where we are—the agreement will not come into force for another year. That timeline shows the sclerotic nature of EU negotiations. I very much look forward to the time when our Government can negotiate such deals with Japan and others as an independent sovereign nation.

Whatever grumbles I have about how we got here, the benefits of the agreement are clear. Japan is the third-largest global economy. Given the size of our economies—Britain is the fifth or sixth-largest, depending on what measure we prefer—trade between us is very much under-weighted. We export more to Sweden, which is an economy of just 10 million people. We export more to Qatar, which is an economy of just 2.5 million people. We import more from Norway, which has just 5 million people, than we import from Japan, which has 127 million people.

The economic partnership agreement will increase that trade, which is currently virtually in balance at about £14 billion either way. Estimates show that the agreement will increase bilateral trade—UK trade to Japan—by up to £5 billion. I believe that to be an underestimation of what can be achieved.

I welcome the deal as a step forward in liberalising global trade, but the deals I want our Secretary of State to do over the coming years are with developing nations. I want our consumer pound to be spent helping developing countries to trade towards prosperity, and I want our consumers to benefit from low global prices, free of protectionist EU tariffs.

I support the agreement and look forward to more as we take control of our tariff schedules and become a global force for free trade. The world is sadly in danger of descending back into protectionism, whether directly through tariffs or through non-tariff barriers. I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Brent North. I need to impress upon him and others that this deal and others like it, and any rollover deals or future beneficial deals around the world, will not be achievable if we stay with a customs union or the customs union. We need to be an independent sovereign nation.

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James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I intend to speak only briefly. I welcome the Minister for Trade Policy, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) to his place. I think we all agree that his first performance was outstanding. I am sorry he is not in his place, but the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) gave a very concise and well-defined explanation of how international competition works. That was surprising and welcome from the Scottish National party Benches, because we so very rarely hear such sensible discourse from that side of the House.

I had the privilege of visiting Japan, with my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), in September 2016. It was shortly after the Brexit vote and it is fair to say that our decision to leave the European Union generated quite a bit of disquiet and concern among Japanese society and Japanese businesses. Indeed, Prime Minister Abe wrote a fair and balanced letter to our own Prime Minister outlining their concerns.

A huge degree of work on a bilateral basis by our Department for International Trade and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, right up to bilateral meetings from Prime Minister to Prime Minister, has gone a long way to calming those concerns and we have seen significant increases in investment by Japan in the UK. Japan already invests heavily in this country, with over 1,000 businesses employing over 100,000 people. Despite Brexit, SoftBank committed to a very significant investment in Arm, a fantastic innovative British company.

I am very glad to say that in the conversations I have had with Japanese businesses and politicians, the enthusiasm for Great Britain and British products seems to be completely unabated. We talk about how welcome Japanese manufacturing is here in the UK, but when I went to Japan it was very clear that they have a huge appetite for British-branded goods. I understand fully why colleagues from the Scottish National party are so keen on a UK-Japanese business arrangement, because the Japanese, without a shadow of a doubt, have a real taste for Scotch whisky. Indeed, they produce very good whiskies of their own, which are well worth a taste.

After 29 March 2019, we will no longer be just a star on someone else’s flag. We will be an independent free-trading nation and we will be reaching out to partners across the world. One of the strongest and best partnerships ahead of us is with the good people of Japan. I welcome that and I welcome this motion.

3.53 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I welcome the motion before the House. As with the previous debate, I believe this is a logical and sensible approach as we move through Brexit into the transition and into renegotiating these matters. The Democratic Unionist party will therefore be supporting the motion.

In Northern Ireland, we have a number of Japanese-owned businesses. This has happened more through an organic approach, whereby companies have been taken over by Japanese companies. However, I had the opportunity to go to Japan with a trade mission a few years ago and I could certainly see huge opportunities, which will only help and which I think will be good. I believe this a good deal.

I think some will be surprised by the comments and criticisms that have been made today, particularly on process, but there is a very easy answer to them. It is only through the United Kingdom leaving the customs union and leaving a customs union that we can put in place our own meaningful processes on international trade. European Union processes, in relation both to this motion and to the previous motion on CETA, have flushed out a number of key issues relating to investors, arbitration and services. I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement about looking at services and their potential as we move forward and renegotiate the deals that are in place. The experience of the European Union in such deals provides valuable learning opportunities that can inform our way forward as the United Kingdom takes responsibility for this policy area.
We have heard many different contributions from across the House about free trade, which we proudly support. The Secretary of State has also said, however, that free trade does not mean trade without rules. Brexit provides the opportunity for a meaningful discussion and debate, for the first time in a long time, on what the rules should be for the United Kingdom.

Fundamentally, international trade deals must be good for all parties. They must be positive for business, consumers and our economy, and for building international relationships. To listen to many, including in this place, there seems to be much confusion about that. I have no doubt that our UK negotiators and the UK Government must—and will—go and fight for the best deal, and a good deal, for the United Kingdom with the European Union and in trade deals globally. However, that must take into consideration our UK regional interests. It must also take account of Northern Ireland interests.

The freedom to make our own trade deals undoubtedly brings opportunities, but sadly they have been drowned out by so much negativity. I believe that not having a proper and meaningful debate thus far about the potential for trade deals, free of the European Union, is sad for business and bad for business. We need to move on and embrace the opportunities that Brexit will bring. The Secretary of State will be aware of the very strong desire to do so of many in business and the strong advice on economic impacts relating to the importance of EU-third party trade deals to the UK economy. I support the Government’s policy on rolling forward the EU third-party trade deals with some 40 countries. Some will be surprised that there has been opposition from the Labour Front Bench team today to the Canadian and the Japanese deals, and, since it is the Government’s policy to roll forward the existing deals with all 40 countries, there needs to be an indication now of which of those deals Labour Front Benchers no longer support and feel should be renegotiated.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Would it not be useful if the UK Government could give bits of paper to those 40 countries to show that the warm words actually mean something?

Emma Little Pengelly: Absolutely. As I indicated, I fully support the desire of the Secretary of State and the UK Government to secure those agreements and roll them forward. It is absolutely clear that the best approach—the logical, sensible approach—is to secure the current situation. We should agree this motion, as we agreed the previous motion, and use that as the foundation to build on and renegotiate in due course. It is absolutely clear that business wants as much certainty as possible on economic impacts relating to the importance of EU-third party trade deals to the UK economy. I support the Government’s policy on rolling forward the EU third-party trade deals with some 40 countries. Some will be surprised that there has been opposition from the Labour Front Bench team today to the Canadian and the Japanese deals, and, since it is the Government’s policy to roll forward the existing deals with all 40 countries, there needs to be an indication now of which of those deals Labour Front Benchers no longer support and feel should be renegotiated.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate. I hope that we can continue to build on the strong relations between the United Kingdom and Japan. Both countries are advanced developed economies, and our liberal democracies share many cherished values, none more important than trade. I welcome this debate, therefore, because as we leave the EU we must maximise our opportunities for trade and continue to grow our share of prosperity. OECD figures put our countries on a similar growth trajectory, yet we lag behind on export projections, with 3.3% growth, compared with 4.5% for Japan. We need to see this improve. It is essential that because, and not despite of, Brexit we develop an independent trade policy to facilitate and maximise our exports and support growing industries.

That is why I am determined that everything possible be done to ensure that our Government adopt a transitional trade agreement with Japan. We must adopt and build on this trade agreement to ensure continuing and blossoming relations with Japan. I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s work on her recent trade delegation visit to Japan, where she met the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, and at which a commitment was given to working quickly to establish a new economic partnership between the UK and Japan to match as closely as possible the final terms reached in the EU agreement.

Why is this so important for the UK and places such as my constituency? Improving our trading relations with Japan means reducing the cost for British businesses wanting to trade with Japan and opening our businesses up to new and exciting opportunities. For places such as Stoke-on-Trent, this is not something new. We have a long and proud history of economic links with Japan. Many British ceramicists have imitated and developed the styles of the fine Japanese porcelain dating from the early 19th century. By the 1850s, with the opening up of trade between Japan and Britain, the flow of goods and influences on design and creativity only grew. Today, this exchange of ideas and creativity between our two countries goes from strength to strength.
Reiko Kaneko, a ceramicist with a studio in my constituency, grew up in Japan and has chosen to develop her business in Longton in Stoke-on-Trent South, designing and making fine modern ceramic products. Her hard work to build on and encourage greater collaboration between ceramic makers in the UK and Japan is to be celebrated, and I would encourage all hon. Members to buy some of her wonderful ceramics. I also had the honour of meeting the Japanese ambassador in Parliament towards the end of last year, and I was delighted to learn that he had recently visited World of Wedgwood in my constituency.

The Japanese continue to take an increasing interest in the UK and what we have to offer. Local manufacturers have told me that they see a real opportunity to boost sales of local products to the Japanese market. The continually growing demand for British products in Japan is a mark of the high quality of British products, especially ceramics.

4.3 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Today we celebrate an important agreement with a long-standing and close ally and, more widely, a further landmark for free trade and a commitment to closer relations with Asia. I congratulate the new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), on both his elevation and the case he made in favour of the agreement, while also thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for all he did for the new Department for International Trade.

The contrast with the other side of the House is striking: acres of unoccupied Benches, considerable misgivings about free trade, Divisions on what should be uncontested issues and appeals to colleagues by sensible free traders such as the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), who is not in his place now, for his party not to be the party of narrow protectionism. It is a disappointing sight, with the shadow Secretary of State the closest thing we have in this country to the moment to a Trump-style mercantilist, unable, sadly, to see the benefits to consumers from lower tariffs and lower costs of imported goods bringing down our cost of living and inflation, as well as opening markets for our goods and services, especially to Japan, where the power of the “made in Britain” brand is strong and above all based on the quality of product and service.

There are issues ahead, of course, and I would welcome comments from the Minister on some of them in the time remaining. We will need confirmation that this agreement will be rolled over during the transition and thereafter extended until it can be widened and deepened. When does the Minister expect progress on this? There may be opportunities to bring down the cost of Japanese electrical vehicles which would speed up the reduction of both diesel vehicles and emissions in the UK. What assessment has the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made of the potential for this? And what opportunities has the trade and working group identified for us to take forward? What would be the impact on the terms of this and any other relevant bilateral agreements were the UK to be part of a future trans-Pacific partnership that includes Japan?

Our value to Japanese foreign direct investment depends not least on the ease with which manufactured goods here can access EU markets. Are Ministers clear about the implications of that? In terms of future transparency and parliamentary oversight, does the Minister agree that pre-consultation is the key? What is unsatisfactory about the EU withdrawal agreement arrangements is the idea that after a negotiation Parliament can send the Government back to the negotiating table; that is not a very practical approach. Now that we have EU-negotiated agreements with Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and Japan—not all implemented yet—this encouraging progress in the continent where growth is most likely to be the greatest gives us further opportunities to expand, for example through a services agreement with Hong Kong, Australasia, China and the nations of south-east Asia as well as India.

In all of this, the opportunities for our international trade to go further and deeper are considerable. Nothing, of course, will be easy, but I hope the Minister will make a statement that will be strongly supportive of much closer UK trading relationships with Asia, where we need to open many doors in lands where trust is so important.

4.6 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy to his place and thank his predecessor for all the fine work he did in this area and his great knowledge.

I am very much in favour of this agreement, which is a clearer position than that of the shadow Secretary of State, who has refused all opportunities to say whether he would or would not execute the agreement. He also apparently wants to leave future negotiations in such deals with the EU and seems to think that we will be co-decision makers on that basis. Has he had conversations with the EU about that? Would it agree to such a thing? It seems very unlikely.

The Secretary of State has clearly pointed out the benefits of free trade agreements, as Ricardo did 200 years ago. He has talked about the increase in overall consumption and the bilateral agreements between the two trading nations. He is right. One hundred years ago, 90% of the population of this planet was in extreme poverty. Today it is only 10%. One hundred years ago, only 20% of people got a basic education. Today it is 80%. That demonstrates clearly that free trade is not a zero-sum game. So we should welcome this agreement, which will enable us to set aside these tariffs. That will have a significant impact on trade—an increase in trade of £10 billion to £15 billion per annum.

One thing Ricardo probably could not have foreseen is the way nations have regulated their own economies and the differences between those regulations. Part of the difficulty with these agreements is the harmonisation of regulations—the non-tariff barriers. This is not just about free trade: it has to be fair trade so we operate on a fair and level playing field. That is particularly necessary for our small and medium-sized businesses.

In this place, we rightly bring forward new legislation—whether workplace regulation, environmental regulations, product standards or animal welfare legislation—because we want to see high standards in products and in terms of how we operate business in this country. Clearly, multinationals have different opportunities from small
businesses. They can game the system in many ways—not all of them do—and put their manufacturing facilities in areas with the lowest common denominator. That is certainly a feature of President Trump’s renegotiation of NAFTA. He is trying to ensure that Mexico has a minimum wage, in order to disincentivise car manufacturers from placing their manufacturing facilities in the areas of lowest cost.

In conclusion; free trade, yes, but it absolutely has to be fair trade. In all these agreements, we have to consider small businesses—

4.10 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 1.

Division No. 194

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Aiufrie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanura
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berestford, Sir Paul
Berger, Luciana
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Braverman, Suella
Brenton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caie, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carlisle, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Ganier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Givan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, Zac
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
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, 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
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, 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
Kerr, Stephen
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamb, rh Norman
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McKinnell, Catherine
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norris, James
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mr Nick
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Powell, Lucy
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) 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.—[Jesse Norman.]

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 182.

Division No. 195] [4.24 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afridi, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allin, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
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
Bretheron, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenheath, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carlinage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleerly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert

NOES

Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 7959/18 and Addenda 1 to 11, Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the European Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Japan; and welcomes the proposed signature and conclusion of the agreement.

AUTOMATED AND ELECTRIC VEHICLES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7))

That the following provisions shall apply to the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 23 October 2017 (Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill (Programme)) and 29 January 2018 (Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):
EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement

26 JUNE 2018

EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement

Tellers for the Ayes: Mims Davies and Kelly Tolhurst

NOES

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Duffield, Rosie
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hendry, Drew
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 1
Listing of automated vehicles by the Secretary of State

4.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this we may take Lords amendments 2 to 32.

Jesse Norman: I am very pleased to be able to bring back this piece of legislation to the House. The Bill is an important aspect of our industrial strategy, which was published last year. It brings forward legislation, where it is appropriate, to assist the development and deployment of both automated and electric vehicles in this country. It does so by amending the existing compulsory third party insurance framework for vehicles, extending it to cover the use of automated vehicles. It also gives powers to improve the electric vehicle charging infrastructure framework to ensure that it is easy to use, available in strategic locations and “smart” to alleviate pressures on the grid.

Members will recall that, in addition to the support from both the insurance and the motor industries, this Bill had broad support from across the House when it was considered, and this broad support continued, I am delighted to say, throughout the Bill’s passage in the Lords. The Lords have made several amendments, which have helped to strengthen the Bill still further.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend has done a great job in taking this legislation further forward, notwithstanding the fact that most of the heavy lifting was done when I was the Minister. I wonder whether he might specifically deal with the issue of the design of the charging points.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for drawing the House’s attention to his own role in the creation of this Bill, and for doing so in such a typically modest and retiring way, for which I am grateful. After some consideration, we have decided to look favourably on the idea of continuing the competition that he initiated, possibly in a somewhat amended form. He can take great credit for having initiated the idea, if not for its specific implementation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman knows that, in my constituency, Jaguar Land Rover carries out research and development. Has he had any discussion with the company as to where the batteries might be manufactured?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing the House’s attention to his own role in the creation of this Bill, and for doing so in such a typically modest and retiring way, for which I am grateful. After some consideration, we have decided to look favourably on the idea of continuing the competition that he initiated, possibly in a somewhat amended form. He can take great credit for having initiated the idea, if not for its specific implementation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman knows that, in my constituency, Jaguar Land Rover carries out research and development. Has he had any discussion with the company as to where the batteries might be manufactured?

Question accordingly agreed to.
Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the question of battery manufacturers is a very important one not just for the country, but for the Government in their industrial strategy. The Faraday challenge that we have launched is designed specifically to support new technologies with a view, ultimately, to some form of development and, potentially, manufacture in this country.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I apologise if this has been covered in earlier debates, but will the Minister tell us whether there has been any engagement from the Government with local authorities? For many people, electric charging is likely to take place on the forecourt of their property, and there are clearly issues around dropped kerbs and easy access to people’s forecourts to enable them to charge at home.

Jesse Norman: I can give the right hon. Gentleman comfort on that point. Through officials, we have consulted extensively with local authorities. Indeed, I will discuss some aspects of those consultations later in my remarks.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Lords amendment 14 deals with the regulation-making power in clause 9 and says that these regulations may, for example, deal with technical specifications. Can the Minister confirm to the House that the regulation-making power is wider than that and could, for example, require the operator to display the price per unit that is to be charged? It is important that motorists know what they will be asked to pay before they commit themselves to paying for it.

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that motorists should know what they will be paying. The Bill does what it says and Lords amendment 14 is technical in nature, but he has made his point, which we will be happy to look at more generally as we consider further aspects of the issue.

After clarifications were sought on which vehicles were covered by the definition in the Bill, the Lords made changes to clauses 1 and 2. Amendments 1 to 4 clarify that the measures in the Bill apply only to vehicles that are designed or adapted to be capable—in at least some circumstances or situations—of safely driving themselves, and are able lawfully to be used in that way on roads or other public places in Great Britain. For example, these amendments clarify that the insurance measures in the Bill will not apply to an agricultural vehicle on public roads which, although perfectly capable of autonomously running up and down a private field, could only be driven on the road manually by a human driver. Such a vehicle will fall under the current insurance regime under the Road Traffic Act 1988.

Lords amendment 5—the new clause after clause 6—places a requirement on the Government to report on “the impact and effectiveness of section 1; the extent to which the provisions...ensure that appropriate insurance or other arrangements are made in respect of vehicles that are capable of safely driving themselves.”

We want the report to be as relevant and useful as possible, so we have urged that the timing of the report should be after the measures have been in operation for a reasonable period. Our judgment is that a report prepared two years after the list is first published will cover a time when secondary legislation can be introduced, automated vehicles can be added to the list and insurance policies can be offered to drivers of automated vehicles. Subsection (1)(a) of this new clause will require the Secretary of State to report on the impact on consumers and industry, and on the effectiveness of clause 1—that is, whether the definitions and list work as intended.

By specifically referencing the Road Traffic Act 1988 in clause 7, Lords amendment 6 provides a definition of the term “road” to ensure consistency with existing legislation, and to provide clarity to the public and industry.

The Lords also made a number of changes relating to electric vehicles. They expressed concern that the draft text did not make it sufficiently clear that hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles were covered by the measures, alongside battery electric vehicles. Therefore amendments were made to add “refuelling” wherever “charging points” are mentioned. As the House well knows, the Government are taking a technology-neutral approach to the development and deployment of electric vehicles, and these changes serve to make that clearer on the face of the Bill.

The peers made two substantive changes to policy. The first was to add a power in clause 9 to enable the Secretary of State to bring forward regulations to set availability, maintenance and performance standards for public charging infrastructure. It is inevitable that public charging points will fall into disrepair from time to time, particularly in the early stages as new technologies are developing. Having a significant number of public charging points out of action risks adversely affecting the experience of users, and could inconvenience and frustrate drivers of electric vehicles. Amendments 11, 14 and 30 therefore provide the Government with the necessary power to introduce regulations that would specify performance standards for publicly available EV charge points, and will ensure that operators take measures to ensure that faulty charging points are repaired. I believe that these amendments will improve the Bill, as the provision of this power will help to ensure that we have a widely available and reliable public charging network.

4.45 pm

The second substantive change to policy was the introduction of a new clause after clause 10 through amendment 20. This new clause provides a duty for the Secretary of State to consider requests from elected Mayors to make regulations under clause 10. Cities, regions and counties can play a hugely important role in dealing with air quality challenges, and the provision of charging infrastructure will need to be a part of addressing that challenge. The new clause will give elected Mayors a lever to help them deliver that locally. It enables elected Mayors—the Mayor of London and Mayors of combined authorities—to designate locations, limited to large fuel retailers within their areas, at which they would wish charging infrastructure to be installed. Mayors would be required to consult on their proposals and notify the Secretary of State of the intent for regulations to be made. It is then for the Secretary of State to decide whether to make such regulations.

As with part 1, the Lords has, through amendment 32, added a new clause to report on the effectiveness of regulations made under part 2 of the Bill. This is a broad reporting clause that would, for example, allow
the Government to assess the effects of the regulations made under the Act on electric vehicle uptake, to assess the effects of regulations on industry and consumers, to assess how regulations are benefiting the energy system and consumer electricity bills, and to assess the impact on the Government’s carbon and air quality targets. As well as assessing the impact of the regulations made, the amendment introduces a requirement for an assessment of the need for other regulations to be made under this part during subsequent reporting periods. That will help to ensure that further regulations are made in a timely and appropriate manner. A number of smaller, technical changes were also made to the Bill that have improved the drafting and clarified the regulation-making procedures.

Further to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), we have committed to taking forward legislation to ensure that pricing is standardised and transparent for consumers. We have existing powers to enable us to do so, and we will act on those.

I urge the House to agree to these Lords amendments.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I do not intend to speak for long because we support the aims of this Bill. However, we want to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of research and development in this important and fast-moving industry. We supported the Bill first time round and welcome these amendments today. That is largely because of the good work of our colleagues in the other place, and I pay tribute to them.

The Bill aims to provide the framework necessary to encourage the take-up of electric vehicles as well as updating the regulatory environment for motor insurance for them. We particularly welcome the amendments to include hydrogen filling stations as well as electric charging points. Currently, there are about 12,000 electric vehicle charge points in the UK but only seven hydrogen refuelling points.

The Government must work harder if they are serious about tackling poor air quality and climate change. They are nowhere near meeting their legally binding 2020 target of 10% of transport fuel being renewable. They are presiding over an air quality crisis, and they could and should be more ambitious in dealing with vehicle pollution. Electric vehicles are an important way, but not the only way, of confronting these serious problems.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State a series of secondary legislative powers for the design and standardisation of charging points. Universal standardisation and distribution of charging points across the UK is crucial if the Government really are serious about increasing uptake. I have mentioned this before, but there are more charging points available on the Orkney Islands than in Blackpool, Grimsby and my own city of Hull combined. The Government must do much better.

There is also a new amendment to review the legal framework for automated and electric vehicles that should ensure the effectiveness of the regulations in this Bill as this fast-changing technology develops. Industry, I think I am right to say, has generally welcomed these amendments. The Association of British Insurers said that Lords amendment 5

“provides a realistic timeframe for reporting as the insurance industry does not expect fully automated driving technology to be commercially available until 2021 at the earliest”.

I thank the Government Front-Bench team for the spirit of co-operation in which the Bill has been handled. I reiterate my thanks to colleagues in the other place, as the Bill has returned here in a much better condition. We thank the Government for listening and acting on our concerns.

Mr John Hayes: I only wish to speak briefly. The Minister and the shadow Minister are right that the Bill has improved during its passage. That is in part due to the spirit in which we have conducted ourselves and scrutinised this legislation.

I think there is general agreement across the House that this is the right legislation at the right time, but it is difficult to try to envisage what a future might look like of which we cannot be certain. The technology will move on apace. It is not clear what people will be driving in one, two or three decades’ time, so making these decisions about infrastructure is challenging.

None of the less, it seems to me that three things are clear, and these amendments give us a chance to rehearse them once again, albeit briefly. The first is that the charging infrastructure is a critical element in getting people to accept electric vehicles. If people are confident about the ability to charge conveniently, reasonably quickly and, I hope, inexpensively, they are more likely to embark upon the journey that is the acquisition of an electric vehicle. When people are surveyed about why they do not buy electric vehicles, charging infrastructure and the fear that they will run out of charge is often cited as one reason.

Having accepted that axiomatic argument, the second point is that there is a perfectly proper case to be made for what the infrastructure needs to look like. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) is right—I rarely agree with him, but on this occasion I cannot help but do so—that on-street charging is critical. Many people live in flats, particularly in cities, and they do not have easy and convenient points at which they can charge their vehicle. The work of local authorities will therefore be critical, in terms both of new housing developments and of existing settlements.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): There are two charging points close to my house, and the thing that causes problems is that the same cars are there permanently. In terms of infrastructure, we will need more charging points, because people will not use electric cars unless they can charge them quickly if they run out. At the moment, I see those two charging points permanently occupied by two cars.

Mr Hayes: With characteristic insight mixed with perspicacity, my hon. Friend has anticipated my next point, which is that once one has made the decision about the need to put into place charging infrastructure, it needs to be sufficiently plentiful and recognisable. Moreover, there has to be universality about it: the method of payment has to be common and the way in which one engages with the charging point needs to be common too. The last thing we want is for electric users to arrive at a charging point to find that they do not have the means to pay—it might be a pre-paid device, for example—or cannot plug their vehicle in at all because it is a proprietary charging point. Universality, recognisability and affordability are fundamental.
Tom Brake: Perhaps I could add one extra thing to the right hon. Gentleman’s list, which is enforcement. It is not only electric vehicles hogging particular charging points. Often, in my experience, vehicles that are not electric are also hogging the electric bays, simply because they have not noticed that those bays are not for them.

Mr Hayes: I do not want to agree with the right hon. Gentleman too often, otherwise this fleeting romance might become a marriage—heaven forbid, as we know how that worked out for the Liberal Democrats last time round—but he is right again. Rapid charging will, to some degree, help with that, but we also need a sufficient number of charge points, conveniently located.

It is possible that, knowing me as he does, the Minister assumed, not unreasonably, that in making my point about the look and feel of the charging points I was merely advancing a case for aesthetics. It is true that, like Keats, I believe that truth is beauty and beauty is truth, but getting the appearance of the charging points right will be vital to the gaining of public acceptance. People know what a pillar box looks like, they know what a telephone box looks like, and they need to know with equal certainty what an electric charging point looks like. It should be beautiful, but it should also be immediately identifiable for what it is.

Having made those few points, I endorse all that the Minister said about the character of the amendments and the nature of the consideration so far. Once again, I congratulate him on the role that he has played—together, by the way, with my old friends on the Opposition Front Bench, who have themselves played a dutiful and entirely responsible role in trying to make this legislation better.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

Mr Hayes: I should have mentioned the hon. Gentleman as well.

Alan Brown: Cheers! We had better watch out that this does not become the road to a marriage.

The right hon. Gentleman—the former Minister—talked about the standardisation of charge points, and I agreed with what he said. I thought that he was going to end with a reference to the “Hayes hook-up”.

I will be brief, although last night I got a slight kick out of speaking for longer than others thought I was entitled to. I support the Bill, as do the Labour Opposition, and I support the Lords amendments, most of which are tidying-up measures. I also welcome the clarification on hydrogen fuel cells because there is no doubt that hydrogen will play a big part in the decarbonisation of transport.

In particular, I support Lords amendment 32, which requires the Secretary of State to report on the impact of part 2 of the Bill. I have previously pointed out to the Minister that when I have tabled amendments suggesting that the Government should report, I have always been rebuffed. I looked back and found the new clauses about reporting that I tabled in the Public Bill Committee, and, in the context of the reporting to which the Government are committed, I hope that they will take on board some of my previous suggestions.

One of my new clauses, entitled “Review of impact of Part 2”, required the Secretary of State to report on “the number and location of charge points in the United Kingdom...the resulting uptake of electric vehicles...the manufacturing of electric vehicles”.

Another, entitled “Report on electric charging points”, referred to the development of “a strategy for establishing charging points for...domestic properties...urban and rural settlements, and...the road network.”

Sir Greg Knight: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for the motorist to know where the charging points are? Most satellite navigation systems have a feature that will display the locations of filling stations. Is it not essential for them also to display the locations of electric charging points?

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly. There are already online maps that can do that, but it is important for people to be aware that the information exists, so that they can take comfort in the knowledge that they can undertake longer journeys because they know exactly where the charging points are.

I also tabled a new clause requiring the Secretary of State to report on the impact of charging points on “energy consumption...grid management, and...grid storage capacity.”

Regular reporting would obviously keep Members informed, but it would also help Governments to develop future strategies.

I welcome the Bill and look forward to its implementation, but I have another request. I hope that there will be some trials of autonomous vehicles in Scotland, because that has not happened yet.

Tom Brake: I first want to say that I do not think marriage is an option so long as I do not wear a tie, because I know that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) has strong views on that subject, so I may be tieless for a long time to come.

I want to reinforce the point about talking to local authorities about flatted developments, but also—I have already had such inquiries, as I suspect other Members have—about residents who want to be able to charge their electric car where they park it at the front of the house, but cannot do so because of the issues of dropped kerbs and so on. That will become a growing problem in future years.

We must ensure that we can respond to the way in which technology changes. I want to put in a plug—pardon the pun—for the Dearman engine, with which the right hon. Gentleman may or may not be familiar, which works on liquid nitrogen. It has some very exciting applications in relation to the auxiliary power units used at the front of refrigerated trucks, which at present often use some of the dirtiest engines available, without any sort of environmental controls. Such technology has the ability to address some very significant air quality issues in our town centres, but it would also require an infrastructure for liquid nitrogen, which is clearly not readily available at present.

This is a very welcome set of amendments. The Bill is also welcome, but it must be flexible enough to pick up and move with other technologies as they develop.
5 pm

**Jesse Norman:** With the leave of the House, I will briefly address some of the many interesting points raised by colleagues. Let me start by thanking the Opposition for the constructive and thoughtful way in which they have engaged with the Bill. I am very grateful for all the points that have been raised.

Let me start with the points made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). On the importance of hydrogen, that point is absolutely understood. We have so far committed something like £23 million to refuelling and the development of hydrogen-based technologies, so I take that point. On renewable fuels, he will be aware that we took the renewable transport fuel obligation through the House a few months ago, and I expect to return to the House to consider E10 and other renewable fuels more widely over the next few months.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to flag up the issue of charge points. We recently had a roundtable to talk to those in the industry. At the moment, they are quite comfortable about the way in which charge points are being rolled out by the private sector. However, as electric vehicles start to get into an S curve of take-up, it will be very important to have adequate charge points to meet users’ needs.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) is of course absolutely right that we have no capacity to predict the future—uncertainty is an ever-present factor of human life—so all we can have is flexibility and resilience, and that is what we are trying to build in through the flexible structure of this enabling legislation. He rightly points again to the importance of the charging infrastructure. The issue of range anxiety is being overcome with the next generation of electric vehicles, as he will be aware. That itself will go some way to removing anxiety about charging, but I absolutely take the point.

My right hon. Friend quoted Keats. I very much look forward to his composing an “Ode on a well designed charging point” in the style of Keats. Perhaps he can present it to the Speaker in due course—and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Indeed, my right hon. Friend could recite it in the House.

I also thank the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for his constructive support for the Bill. Let me make a couple of points in response. He is absolutely right to refer to the points he raised during the passage of the Bill and in the debates we have had so far, and I am grateful to him for that. He is right to focus on public communication and trust. With all new technologies, the issue of consent is essential, and we want the roll-out of autonomous vehicles and electric vehicles to be warmly received and carried through by the public.

Finally, I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on his point about local authorities, as I have said, and I am very glad that he has placed the Dearman engine and similar technologies on the public record.

That said, let me say that our ambition is to lead the world in electric vehicles. The powers in this Bill will help us to do that, and I commend it to the House.

**Lords amendment 1 agreed to.**

**Lords amendments 2 to 32 agreed to.**
Tellers for the Ayes:
Mims Davies and Kelly Tolhurst

Tellers for the Noes:
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Freet Kaur
Gildon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kynes, Tony
Lake, Bel
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marston, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian

835
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
26 JUNE 2018
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
836
Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

EU COMMUNITY LICENCE ARRANGEMENTS

'(1) It is an objective of the Government, in negotiating a withdrawal agreement from the EU, to seek continued UK participation in the EU’s Community Licence arrangements.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on progress made on any negotiations to secure the objective in subsection (1).

(3) The report must be laid before Parliament before 31 December 2018.’—(Tom Brake.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.17 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Report on the impact of leaving the European Union on the international transport of goods

'(1) Within six months of Royal Assent of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before both Houses of Parliament an assessment of—

(a) the impact of leaving the European Union; and

(b) any relevant international agreement with the European Union or European Union member States, on the international transport of goods by road.

(2) An assessment under subsection (1) must consider in particular—

(a) waiting times at ports for goods vehicles transporting goods internationally;

(b) the likelihood of procedures to park goods vehicles transporting goods internationally on the M20 motorway in Kent (“Operation Stack”) needing to be activated in the future;

(c) the likelihood of requiring additional parking around ports for goods vehicles transporting goods internationally, and

(d) the likelihood of the United Kingdom remaining a party to the 1987 Convention on a Common Transit Procedure, as amended.

(3) The assessment in subsection (1) must so far as practicable analyse the expected difference in outcomes which would result from the policies of Her Majesty’s Government at the time of the assessment and continued participation in the European Union Single Market and Customs Union.’

New clause 3—Report on the effect of ratifying the 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Traffic

'(1) The Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament an assessment of the effect of ratifying the 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Traffic (“the 1968 Convention”) on the international transport of goods by road.

(2) The assessment must consider—

(a) the likelihood of drivers of goods vehicles with United Kingdom driving licenses needing to purchase an International Driving Permit to travel to European Union member States after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union; and

(b) the likelihood of reservations to the 1968 Convention issued by the United Kingdom, insofar as they relate to the international transport of goods, being subject to a legal challenge.'
(3) The report must be laid before both Houses of Parliament on or before 28 March 2019.

(4) In this section, “International Driving Permit” has the same meaning as in the 1968 Convention.’

Amendment 4, in clause 2, page 2, line 40, leave out from “or” to the end of line 42.

This amendment would remove reference to first come first serve or an element of random selection as methods for granting an application for a permit.

Amendment 2, in clause 5, page 3, line 39, at end insert—

‘(1A) The regulations must ensure that the cost of applying for a permit under this Act to travel to an European Union member State is not disproportionate to the cost an applicant would have incurred in previously applying for a Community Licence.’

Amendment 5, in clause 9, page 5, line 36, after “Kingdom” insert “, and setting out the number of permits requested, granted and refused”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to report on the number of permits requested, granted and refused.

Government amendments 1 and 3.

Tom Brake: It is certainly not my intention to detain the House for long, so if people need to make moves to secure the presence of the person who has secured the Adjournment debate, I give them that warning now. A discipline of the House that is imposed on small Opposition parties is that we have to speak briefly, and I would, in fact, recommend this to all in the House. I am not going to single out anyone in particular, apart from perhaps the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who I think could benefit from a bit of discipline in his speeches in this place. That would free up time for others to speak in debates such as the Canada debate earlier today, which I was hoping to speak in.

Although I will not detain the House for long, I want to spend a bit of time focusing on my new clauses 1 to 3 and amendment 2. New clause 1 would require the UK to negotiate to remain in the EU’s community licences scheme post-Brexit. That would enable UK hauliers who have international operator’s licences to deliver goods to and from the UK to continue to do exactly that, including through cabotage rights that would enable them to carry out journeys within another EU country. This is a very sensible proposal and one that Labour and the Liberal Democrats tabled a joint amendment on in the Lords, with slightly different wording from the one that we have here today. There was cross-party, or at least two-party, agreement that this was a sensible proposal.

I am hoping that when the Minister responds, he will say that the Government will negotiate on that basis, or at least negotiate to achieve exactly the same thing, and will particularly have regard to the financial and administrative impact that an alternative scheme might have on hauliers. Apparently, the purpose of our leaving the EU was to get rid of red tape and make it much easier for hauliers and others to conduct business. There is a risk, however, that replacing EU community licences, which cost nothing and are easy to secure and on which there is no limit on the number that can be issued, with a scheme for which hauliers have to pay and which might require them to renew on a regular basis, far from getting rid of red tape, will actually add to it. However, we know that some of the proposals from different factions within the Cabinet, particularly for things such as maximum facilitation, could impose huge additional costs on business and not get rid of red tape at all.

I hope that the Minister can say precisely what the Government intend to do about replacing community licences if they are not to replace them with an equivalent scheme. The purpose of amendment 2 is to ensure that, if the Government do not secure a successor scheme that is identical or similar to it, the cost that hauliers will have to pay is restricted. While some of the big haulage companies might be able to pay whatever the new permit might cost, the change could place a significant cost burden on smaller hauliers—those operating perhaps one or two vehicles. I hope he can say what plan B or the backstop would be in the event of a failure to deliver a community licence equivalent.

The purpose of new clause 2 is to ensure that the Government publish a report on the impact of Brexit on the transport of goods. When I tabled it last week, I was not aware how timely it would be. In the last 24 hours—I am sure there will be others in the next few days—a series of blue chip companies, including Airbus, BMW, Honda and Siemens, have highlighted the projected or potential cost to their businesses of problems at the border. I am sure that the Government would want to report back on the impact, particularly of having to bring back Operation Stack. Many people will remember what happened a couple of years ago when a huge tailback occurred at Dover. Apparently, it was triggered by two French police officers based in Dover not turning up for their shift, and that led to a 15-mile tailback.

What will the impact be if that happens as a result of the need for additional vehicles to be checked? When I visited the port of Dover, I assumed that Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union would already have visited. There has been some interesting coverage on BBC South East recently. It rang round the Opposition spokespeople to ask if they had been to the port of Dover to talk to the authorities about the impact of Brexit. I had been. I had been in the control tower to see the operation. However, when BBC South East asked if a DEXEU Minister had been to talk to the port—the largest port, certainly in terms of freight vehicles, with 10,000 passing through it—it was told that apparently not a single one had. I thought that a little remiss. I presume they have been now, given that it got lots of coverage on TV, and so will understand the potential impact on the transport of goods if there are problems on the border.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Needless to say, I have been to the port of Dover, as the maritime Minister, when I served in that capacity, and for other purposes. Just so the right hon. Gentleman does not inadvertently mislead the House, I must point out that in the very week of that coverage, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Stella Braverman), visited the port. It is important to point out that those Ministers have taken interest in the affairs at Dover.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He has confirmed that the harmony and potential marriage that existed between us in the earlier debate have perhaps reached a state of acrimony and we no longer agree on the subject. But his intervention was
interesting. I do wonder whether the visit of the DExEU Minister post-dated or pre-dated the BBC South East news item. If it post-dated it, I would be a little suspicious as to why the Minister suddenly chose to reorganise her diary with a view to going to the port of Dover, perhaps rather in the way the Foreign Secretary had to reorganise his diary to be in Afghanistan during the Heathrow vote. I know, however, that I should not dwell for too long on trips to Afghanistan as that is not the subject of our debate.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the ports issue and on the visits, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is very strange that the Secretary of State for Transport said that, post Brexit, there will be no further checks and it will be just like the US-Canada border? In fact there are checks at that border and also we learned from a written question from me to the Secretary of State that he has not even visited the US-Canada border, so goodness knows how he thought he knew how it operates. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is symbolic of the shambles?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As it is on the subject of borders, which is what we are debating, it is an entirely appropriate intervention. It gives me the opportunity to point out that the same Secretary of State often refers to the advantages of the border between Norway and Sweden. Again I am not sure whether he has visited that border. Maybe he has. If he has, he will have found on his visit that some of the border points are inconveniently shut at certain times of the day and night. He will also have discovered that one of the factors that Swedish business often cites as being a major constraint on doing trade with Norway is the fact that the border is not in fact frictionless. So there is a bit of a problem in terms of the Secretary of State, but I am sure he has now been on many fact-finding missions and has increased his knowledge of the subject on which he speaks.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talked about the causes of Operation Stack in 2015. There were two causes, neither of which was the one he identified, so I would not want him to be inadvertently misleading the House. The causes were the migrant crisis affecting the operation of Eurotunnel and the French ferries going on strike. It was very clear at the time that those were the causes. Ministers were all over it. It was not as he is suggesting. I am sure it is appropriate, and he will be grateful, that we have been able to put the record straight.

Tom Brake: I am afraid that we will have to disagree on this matter. If the hon. Gentleman wants to raise the issue with the port authorities, from whom I got this information, I recommend he does so. That is what they told me. However, we can have an argument about whether that particular incident—there has been more than one Operation Stack—was or was not caused by migrants through the tunnel, which is some distance from the port of Dover, or alternatively by two French police officers not turning up, but what is indisputable is the point that Airbus, BMW, Honda and Siemens have been making in the past few days: the Government are at risk of creating major problems for them in terms of their just-in-time operations because of whatever the Government are planning—if only we knew what they were planning on future customs arrangements. Added to that, the Government are causing those businesses huge uncertainty, which probably explains why investment in the car industry has dropped by half in the last 12 months.

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5.30 pm

My final point relates to new clause 3. I do not know whether the Minister was a supporter of leave or remain. When I tried to check, I found lots of references to him sitting on the fence. Perhaps he would like to clarify whether he came off the fence or whether he sat uncomfortably on it on referendum day. I see that he is not tempted to respond. One thing that I certainly cannot recall being written on the side of a bus—or indeed a bulldozer—was what we have here in relation to new clause 3, which requires the Government to assess the ratification of the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic. Unless one is a bit of a geek, this is rather a specialist area, and I am going to have to refer to a briefing. It tells us why we now need to ratify that convention. It states:

“Under EU Directive 2006/126/EC, driving licences issued by the UK are recognised by other EU states and vice versa. Once the UK has left the EU, this directive will no longer apply and a separate agreement is negotiated. Without such a deal, the UK’s relationship with most EU member states would be governed by the 1949 Geneva Convention on Road Traffic. These countries would recognise each other’s licences although they could require that the driver carries an International Driving Permit. However, five EU member states…are not parties to the 1949 Convention. They are instead party to the 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Traffic.”

So the Government are now having to ratify the 1968 convention because of an issue to do with driving licences possibly not being recognised once we have left the European Union, and we have to do it now because there is a 12-month waiting period before the provisions come into effect.

Of course, there are other consequences, as Members who follow this issue closely will know. The UK Government’s ratification of this convention will bring delay was. That is the information I have had. They are the ones in charge of the port and, frankly, I would have thought that they knew what they were talking about. I am happy to give way if he disagrees with me.

Andrew Jones: The causes were very clear. I was the Minister at the time who had responsibility for Operation Stack. I went down and met with people who were operating it and dealing with the problems. What the causes were was extremely clear. The right hon. Gentleman is just plain wrong.

Tom Brake: I am afraid that we will have to disagree on this matter. If the hon. Gentleman wants to raise the issue with the port authorities, from whom I got this information, I recommend he does so. That is what they told me. However, we can have an argument about whether that particular incident—there has been more than one Operation Stack—was or was not caused by migrants through the tunnel, which is some distance from the port of Dover, or alternatively by two French police officers not turning up, but what is indisputable is the point that Airbus, BMW, Honda and Siemens have been making in the past few days: the Government are at risk of creating major problems for them in terms of their just-in-time operations because of whatever the Government are planning—if only we knew what they were planning on future customs arrangements. Added to that, the Government are causing those businesses huge uncertainty, which probably explains why investment in the car industry has dropped by half in the last 12 months.

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in other matters relating to unregistered trailers. So we now have a chain effect, which started with there being nothing on the side of a bus about a requirement to implement the 1968 convention and which has ended up with our having to introduce a law relating to unregistered trailers, because we have to make all this hang together. It is a very messy business.

I am sure the Minister will be aware of the representations that have been made by the people who are responsible for caravans. They are pressing the Government on a particular point, and I am sure that he will be able to respond to it at the end of the debate—that is assuming that he is actually listening to it, which at the moment is not obvious. Presumably someone is taking notes for him in the Box. The question is whether a Government agency will be required to oversee the registration of caravans if they cannot be exempt. An exemption is not obvious. Presumably someone is taking notes for him in the Box. But it could do so at a greatly reduced cost. I hope, just as an aside, that I will be able to get some clarity on that point.

Mr John Hayes: Our trial separation is rapidly ending in divorce. Can I be absolutely clear about this? Most people have argued that the consideration of trailers, which will be a matter of some debate, is a useful and helpful thing. It is understood that it is actually quite a good thing for us to look at these matters. Is the right hon. Gentleman arguing on behalf of the Liberal Democrats that we should have nothing to do with that—in other words, that we should not look at trailers at all? If he is indeed making that case, he will be at odds with the vast majority of people who are considering this legislation.

Tom Brake: Yes, the divorce is proceeding well. Maybe we need to engage Relate to pacify matters. I would point out to the right hon. Gentleman that I was unaware of any call, prior to 23 June 2016, for a trailer registration scheme. It therefore appears to have been Brexit that has triggered the registration of trailers, as opposed to a desire on the part of the Government to address the issue.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The fact that we were not able to ratify the convention for some 50 years says more about the procedures between this place and the European Union. It would be useful for the right hon. Gentleman to accept that the registration of trailers has been brought up on a number of occasions over the years because of the weight limit of trailers that are not registered. In a case that I have brought before the House, which I will speak to later, that resulted in the death of a young child. This legislation has provided a great opportunity to talk about safety, which I think the right hon. Gentleman would agree is the pre-eminent issue.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I think she is about to put on the record the reasons why, for her, this is an important issue. I do not want to dismiss that and I can confirm that I and, I suspect, other Members have had issues with trailers that have been left by the roadside that it is very difficult to do anything about because they are not registered. I agree, but the trigger in this case was not a desire on the Government’s part to address the issue but the fact that Brexit has required them to do a certain thing, which led to a chain of events that has resulted in the requirement to register trailers.

As Members may know, the convention might—although I accept that it is very unlikely—also lead to appeals to the United Nations if the UK does not criminalise jaywalking, require all cars to park on the left-hand side of the road, require drivers to turn on their lights when driving through certain tunnels—something that, on the whole, is probably a good thing—require motorists to turn on their front and back lights at all times, and require parked cars to have parking lights switched on at night or in other periods of low visibility. There has been an interesting chain of events as a problem triggered by Brexit has produced a domino effect and required the Government to legislate for something that might or might not happen, having other unforeseen consequences that, as I said, were not clearly set out on the side of that famous bus. It would have had to have been a very long bus for all the consequences to have been set out on it.

I like to be true to my word. I said that I would be brief, so I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion. I have made the point about community licences and it seems to me that it would be sensible to try to replicate that scheme, as far as possible, to minimise the burden placed on hauliers, minimise any additional cost on them and reduce the risk of UK hauliers simply being excluded from the EU because of the limited number of licences that might be available. I hope that I will hear some positive and engaging words from the Minister on that subject. If that happens, I would not have to put the House through the pain of a vote this evening, getting in the way of Members who might have other things to do, such as watching Nigeria versus—I am not sure who they are playing, but one of the World Cup matches taking place this evening.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): On Second Reading, I raised concerns on behalf of Transam Trucking, a specialist haulage company based in my constituency that is a market leader in the music and entertainment transport business, taking bands and acts on tours all around the UK and Europe. In the busy summer months, the company will have up to 250 lorries on the road or in Europe—150 of its own trucks and a further 100 subcontracted vehicles. Transam had expressed concerns to me that the Bill as originally drafted could cause difficulties in securing contracts for the summer of 2019, for which negotiations are now well under way. I am grateful to the Minister for listening to those concerns and introducing an amendment to the Bill in Committee to address the worries of Transam and other hauliers. I thank him for writing to me in response to the letter in which I set out Transam’s worries in detail.

The amendment that the Government have introduced is clause 2(1)(d). Transam has studied the provision closely and, to a large extent, the Minister has addressed its worries. Prior to the introduction of the current EU road transport regulations, Transam used to work under a non-quota international haulage permit system. Those permits were freely available and the system worked well. There was a worry that that might not be the case in future, and the Government’s amendment implies that
the number of permits will be limited, at the discretion of the Secretary of State, and that permits will be made available only in an emergency or for a special need.

There was a concern that Transam’s customers, if they believed it could not obtain permits, might look to place their business elsewhere with its European competitors, which would not have been constrained by the regulations. However, Transam and its advisers have received assurances that permits will be issued on an unlimited basis for industries such as Transam’s, and I welcome the Government’s clarification of that position.

Hopefully it will not be necessary for the measures contained in the Bill to come into effect and the Government will be able to reach an agreement with the EU so that the existing liberalised access for UK commercial haulage can continue and be developed still further.

It is important to monitor the situation as we move forward, and I will pass on any feedback I get from Transam to the Minister for his information and consideration. Transam’s iconic black trucks have been on the road and on tour all around Europe for over 40 years and, in its own words, Transam has been “ensuring the magic always happens on stage, on time and on budget.”

Transam is a very important business, which is largely geared towards the export market. Post Brexit, it is vital that such business not only continues but grows, and I am grateful to the Minister for addressing its concerns and for providing the opportunity for that to happen.

My focus in seeking to amend the Bill, working with noble Lords and the Opposition Front Bench, has always been public safety, following representations made to me by my constituents Donna and Scott Hussey on the tragic loss of Freddie, their then three-year-old son, who was killed by a 2-tonne trailer.

Since the Bill was introduced in the House of Lords in February, peers and Members from all parties have made thoughtful, informed contributions on the complex issues associated with it. We have heard a lot of arguments on proportionality, on bureaucratic burdens, on cost, on scope and on timeframes, but we have also heard about a number of deaths caused by unsafe trailers.

I am particularly grateful to Lord Bassam, who tabled the initial probing amendment on safety in the context of Freddie’s death, and who pressed the Government to do what their impact assessment said they would do and seize the opportunity of this Bill to improve safety through better regulation. I also pay tribute to Lord Tunnicliffe for tabling the amendment on Report requiring the Government to collate comprehensive data on trailer safety and to publish it in a report, for which the noble Lords voted.

There has been significant discussion and consensus on the gaps and problems in existing information on light trailers and on the degree of threat they might pose. I am pleased that the Government agreed in Committee to produce a report that includes a recommendation on whether compulsory registration or periodic testing of trailers weighing more than 750 kg should be introduced— that is now part of clauses 20 and 21. It was also reassuring to hear the Minister confirm that the report will include an assessment of existing provisions relating to the installation of tow bars, following the compelling arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion).

I pressed the Minister on what information the report would contain and above what we already know, and I was pleased to receive his assurance that, in collating the information, his Department will consider what other types of data, beyond the STATS19 form, it may be able to obtain to inform the recommendations; will pay due attention to the challenge of the under-reporting of accidents, as highlighted in our debates; will use the report as a starting point from which to consider whether significant changes are necessary to how it reports on trailer safety; and will include data on all trailer categories in the report.

I was also pleased to hear the Minister agree that there might be a case for extending the Department’s road safety communications more widely on the issue of driver behaviour and driver education as the Bill comes into effect. As I highlighted a couple of years ago in my Westminster Hall debate to the then Minister, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), we should make it as unacceptable to drive with an unsafe trailer as it is to drive while using a mobile phone or while over the drink-drive limit. Such a culture change requires a commitment from the Department. I thank the Minister for these assurances, and have written to him to ask that he keeps me updated on the progress of the report over the coming months—I am sure he will do so.

6.45 pm

I am also grateful to the Minister for attending the trailer safety summit that I held in my constituency in April, and to all who have supported the campaign and helped to move us one step forward on improving trailer safety. During recess, I will be joining the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency in Avon and Somerset for an enforcement check to see the work its staff carry out at the roadside, and to learn more about some of the issues on the ground. I want to thank the police and those involved in making that happen.

I remind the House, however, that we must not become complacent over the next 18 months. Although Freddie’s case was tragic, it was not isolated. A couple of months ago, I was contacted by a solicitor representing a family whose child had been the victim of a runaway trailer. Last week, I was contacted by a police officer investigating yet another fatality involving a trailer, and I am sure many Members present will have heard of the tragic death of a cyclist here in London last week. I do not know the specifics of these cases, and no doubt they are complex, but that is precisely why the Bill has represented an important opportunity—an opportunity to ensure that the Government are sufficiently ambitious and rigorous in the execution of the contents of the report on trailer safety and their analysis. We owe it to the victims and their families—we owe it to Donna and Scott Hussey, and we owe it to young Freddie—to ensure that this remains a matter of public safety and, as such, is a priority.
Alan Brown: I will be brief. I have supported the Bill’s passage and would give it a cautious welcome in terms of the haulage permits and trailer registration aspects. Being realistic, Member for Bristol South (Karín Smyth) for the work she has done, and for the clauses on trailer safety and on reporting and analysis that she has succeeded in getting inserted into the Bill. I hope they will help us to improve trailer safety on the roads and the general safety of people on and around our road networks. With these remarks, I pay tribute once again to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who seems to have had an 11th-hour epiphany in turning up to speak on the Bill today. Had he been either at the Second Reading debate or in Committee, he would have heard the extensive line-by-line debate we had about so many of the clauses. I thank the Minister for the way he listened carefully during that debate, and he has certainly moved the Bill forward.

Through his amendments, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington expressed concern about the disastrous way in which this Government are approaching Brexit and the devastating impact it is having on business. There are many reasons why we are hearing weekly announcements from industry about reshuffling their business abroad, because delay in their supply chain hits their bottom line. The UK investment loss as the EU is preferred is devastating for jobs and supply chain hits their bottom line. The UK investment loss as the EU is preferred is devastating for jobs and our economy. That would be accelerated by the complex chaos that could ensue at our borders without proper arrangements.

Labour has always stated that we believe the UK should remain within the EU’s community licence arrangements—after all, why leave them? I doubt that a single constituent has raised this issue on the doorstep, yet to leave would not only create a whole new licensing scheme but result in more uncertainty. Not having orderly licensing will result in lorries stacking up at the borders, where, as Imperial College found, a two-minute delay will create a 10-mile hold-up at Dover alone. If further self-harm can be avoided, I urge the Minister to act to ensure that businesses can gain some confidence.

We have learned that the haulage trade will be issued with licences under clause 2(1)(c) in a possibly arbitrary way, although that is subject to the passing of amendment 4, which I tabled, and which would deal with such heightened uncertainty. Confidence is needed at our borders and new clause 1 certainly seeks to build confidence, as did the amendments Labour tabled that were lost in Committee. By not providing confidence, the Government show that they do not have business stability at the heart of their plans and are preparing for such a hard Brexit that businesses will be forced out anyway.

The EU community licence scheme simply works. There is recognition of licences within the EU area and, rather than uncertainty, we should simply adopt this scheme. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington would have been shocked to hear in earlier debates that the licence will be a paper document. It will not even be electronic or a tag that can hold licence data; no, it will be on good old-fashioned paper, and an individual will come up to a cab, knock on the door and ask to see the papers. Instead of today’s secure electronic systems, the Minister prefers higher-risk paper documentation.

Tom Brake: I am sure the hon. Lady appreciates the difficulty for a party with 12 Members of ensuring that someone can be present at all debates, but I am indeed surprised to hear that the Government’s approach would be paper-based, because we have of course heard a huge amount from them about how all these things are going to be electronic, seamless, frictionless and based on new technology. Here is an opportunity for the Government to deploy technology, but they are actually deploying a piece of paper.

Rachael Maskell: I am sure that had the right hon. Gentleman been in Committee, he would have had much opportunity to join in the previous debates on this issue—

Tom Brake: We do not get appointed to Committees.

Rachael Maskell: All Members are entitled to attend Committees, even if they are not Committee members, but I do not need to tell the right hon. Gentleman about those facts.

It will be catastrophic if we get the licence-distribution process wrong, but the Government have yet even to say that their prime objective will be to remain in the EU community licence arrangements.

New clauses 1 to 3 also call on the Government to report to Parliament on the range of impacts that leaving the EU community licence scheme will create. Again, we have sought to do this previously, but to no avail, as the Government are not interested in the facts. They have their fingers crossed and the belief that all will be well as they drive us over the cliff. The Opposition value evidence-based decision making, and my biggest shock about this place is how low a priority analysis still is. Let me give an example: the Minister could not tell me in Committee how many permits will be needed. The high possibility of the need to evoke Operation Stack were we to end up outside the EU community licence arrangements is evident, yet due to the Government’s lack of care and attention, the proposed lorry park did not go ahead because of an error in the planning process.

I could give a lot more examples about the reality of borders, not least in Northern Ireland, and how the scheme will operate, but the Minister was unable to address such issues in Committee. Clearly, borders will be created between the EU and the UK. The Minister denied that that will be the case between the north and
south of Ireland, despite their being different jurisdictions, but even should special arrangements be made to address that issue, there would most certainly be borders between the east and the rest of Great Britain in the west. Both scenarios are completely unacceptable, but the reality of being outside a central customs arrangement will create such a border. Understanding the environment means not only understanding the risks, but having high-quality data to back this up. That is why Labour supports new clauses 1 to 3.

This brings me to my amendments 4 and 5 which, along with amendment 2, relate to permit provision. Clause 2 is very concerning. As with all Bills, it calls for regulations to be made, but is rudderless with regard to why and how. Amendment 4 seeks to amend clause 2(1)(c), which states that the regulations will determine how the Secretary of State will decide who receives a permit, including the criteria for doing so. If there is a method of selection, and it is vague, one could argue that that is all well and good, as that is what regulations are there for. However, we believe that, in paragraph (c), it is more damaging to keep the two examples that are in brackets than to say nothing at all.

I am asking for this Bill to be tidied up this afternoon. It speaks of the utterly chaotic way that the Government are approaching international transactions over trade, and the way that they are handling vital business needs at home. First, paragraph (c) talks about a “first come, first served” basis. That means that a business has to be at the front of the queue each time it needs a permit. There is no identification of strategic industries, no understanding of business need or the need to be able to plan, and no concern over how new entrants further down the line will even get hold of a permit. That is a poor example. Moreover, to include such an example in a Bill as important as this one speaks of serious Government incompetence over logistical planning. May I gently advise the Government once again that it would be in their interests to leave out that example? It does not add any substantial detail, but sets a tone to desensitise their interests to leave out that example? It does not add any substantial detail, but sets a tone to desensitise business as to how logistics will be approached.

Let me come now to my second suggestion. Paragraph (c) mentions “an element of random selection.” I do not think that I need to say much more other than that those words have to go. A “random” approach to economic and logistical planning is the exact reason why businesses are seeking stability elsewhere. We on the Labour Benches get that. I suggest that the section is simply removed to give Government time to consider how they will approach the issuing of permits, before bringing forward secondary legislation. Why make things worse for themselves if they really do not have to? I am sure that the Government will see the common sense in what I suggest, and I trust that they will accept my amendment today.

Amendment 5 seeks to amend clause 9(1). If we are going to introduce a new permit scheme, we must properly review the process. Our amendment seeks to ensure that there is a greater understanding of how the permit system works. In wanting to know the number of permits requested, this simply highlights the scheme demand—something that is important for the Government to understand. Following on from that, the amendment will then require data to be provided on the number of permits granted and refused. In particular, it is important to understand how many were refused and why. For instance, was it owing to an error in the way that the application process was made or was working, or to there not being enough permits available to haulage companies in the first place? If either of those scenarios were the case, the Government would have firm data on which to evidence the change needed in the system. Labour also supports amendment 2, which protects the haulage trade—

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Lady is making a very compelling case for both her amendments. In the case of amendment 5 with the issue about review, I am not sure whether it would be wise to make that part of the legislation. It is perfectly possible for the Government to commit to a review in respect of the legislation. On her first very strong point about the criteria, the Bill as it currently stands uses the words “may include” and then it lists the two things that she describes. It is an inclusive, rather than exclusive, provision. I wonder whether that might be a way through this in a more collaborative vein.

Rachael Maskell: As ever, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points. Regarding my amendment 4, clearly having the words on random selection in the Bill is really unhelpful to the Government because it sets the tone on trade. At this time, we must all acknowledge that business needs a confidence-building approach. It is unhelpful to know that a chaotic approach to the provision of permits is even being considered as a possibility. I trust that the Minister has heard that call. I am trying to assist in the passage of the Bill and what happens afterwards.

6 pm

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) also made a point about my amendment 5. Clause 9(1) actually states that “the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report”. It has already been agreed that that is how we should proceed, so I believe that this point has already been covered.

Labour would support amendment 2, which would protect the haulage trade, and ultimately the public, from the potential of additional expenditure because the UK has had to devise its own permit scheme, as opposed to belonging to the EU community licence arrangements. We are also happy to support Government amendments 1 and 3. Therefore, I do not need to raise any further issues today.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am grateful to all colleagues who have spoken to these amendments and new clauses for the genuinely constructive and warm way in which this debate and the previous stages of the Bill have been conducted, for which I am also very grateful to the Opposition.

Let me start by addressing the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). We have been consistently clear throughout the passage of the Bill that we want to maintain the existing liberalised access for UK hauliers. We absolutely
believe that a mutually beneficial road freight agreement with the EU will support the objective of frictionless trade, and that the future relationship that we are forging with the EU on road freight as part of a wider continuing relationship on trade will be in the interests of both sides.

The right hon. Gentleman's amendment 2 would enshrine on the face of the Bill a negotiation objective of seeking continued participation in the EU's community licence arrangements. I must be clear that we do not believe that an attempt to mandate a particular stance in negotiations, as this amendment seeks to do, is appropriate in this Bill. What we will need—here, as elsewhere—is flexibility and the capacity to adapt. It is clear, however, that the right hon. Gentleman is pressing for reassurances and I want to give him those reassurances.

I am acutely aware, as are other members of the Government, of the benefits of the community licence arrangements as they presently exist. We are also aware that many hauliers would like those arrangements to continue. Although our continued participation in the community licence arrangements may be one outcome of the negotiations, we cannot predict that at this stage. There are, of course, other means to replicate the access that the community licence provides that the amendment would rule out. Let me explain how.

The Government have set out that we are seeking a very close partnership, based on reciprocal binding commitments. That could be based on a comprehensive system of mutual recognition. Our current liberalised, non-permit-based agreements with some non-EU countries provide for mutual recognition of operator licences in lieu of the requirement to have a permit. The UK-Turkey agreement is one such example. The EU has a similar arrangement in the EU-Swiss land transport agreement.

It could be that our future agreement with the EU is based on a similar scheme without the need for community licences or permits. Including in the Bill the objective to seek continued participation in the community licence arrangement would make it harder to agree such a beneficial deal for our hauliers. In fact, it may prove to be an obstacle.

The right hon. Gentleman's new clause 2 is highly comprehensive and would provide for a report not just on the impacts of the measures contemplated, but on the broad range of impacts on international road haulage of our leaving the European Union, including lorry queuing, parking, the need for Operation Stack, transit procedures and membership of the single market. I am not going to respond in detail to the specific provisions in this new clause because they are not relevant to the Bill's aims. Overall, the new clause would not provide a useful analysis that might assist our negotiations or the wider business of Government. Therefore, I am afraid that I do not think it appropriate.

Let me turn to the right hon. Gentleman's amendment on the Vienna convention. As I have said, we are confident that we can secure a mutually beneficial future partnership, but we are putting in place measures that ensure that drivers can continue to travel freely across the EU post exit, whatever the outcome. That is what ratification of the 1968 convention enables us to do. The '68 convention builds on the '49 convention. The vast majority of the requirements within the '68 convention are already covered by The Highway Code and existing legislation. The remaining area of divergence lies in provisions that allow enforcement against unregistered trailer registration, which we addressed through the provisions in part 2.

The right hon. Gentleman is seeking an assessment to be made of the impact of ratification on international transports of goods. Of course, the convention is not focused on trade arrangements but on vehicle standards. We do not believe that ratification will have an impact specifically on rights of access for hauliers after exit. That will be a matter for negotiation. It is also important to say that our intention is to reach a deal that negates the need for additional documents and systematic document checks for all road users. That agreement is in the interests of both sides' driving licence holders. However, the convention does not prevent individual member states from recognising our UK photo-card licences should they deem that appropriate.

The right hon. Gentleman queried whether there would be legal challenges to reservations that we have issued. We do not believe that there is any great scope for that. The potential exists to enter objections to reservations, but the nature of the reservations is highly consistent with the approach taken by many other countries that have ratified the convention. The likelihood of objections is therefore low, and the likelihood of objections by new contracting parties is even lower. The UK is already well aligned with the overwhelming majority of the provisions of the convention. As such, only limited action has been taken to progress with the process of ratification. Through existing legislation, the UK meets the necessary standards of the convention. There will be further changes to The Highway Code, but these will be only minor policy tweaks. Accordingly, the reservations that the UK has put forward relate primarily to matters of domestic law, and this further lowers the risk associated with any reservations.

On the cost of applying for a permit, the Bill allows us to charge fees for permits, as the right hon. Gentleman recognises, and we propose to do so on the basis of recovering the costs of providing those permits and minimising the cost to hauliers, in accordance with Treasury guidelines on managing public money. We will also set fees such that hauliers should not pay any more than they need to in order to meet the cost of the service. This includes a commitment by Government to cover the scheme set-up costs, which have been funded as part of the £75.8 million funding from the Treasury to the Department of Transport. I hope that he and other hon. Members will be reassured by this.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to CRiS and the National Caravan Council's reservation scheme. He is absolutely right that that is a fine scheme in many ways, and it does offer features that this registration scheme does not. Of course, this scheme is not intended to replace it. The vast majority of caravans will not be included in our registration scheme. We have spoken at some length to the National Caravan Council on this, and it has advised us that the number of caravans weighing over 3.5 tonnes may be as few as 150 new units per year. Unfortunately, we are unable—under law on which we have taken advice—to use this scheme, even were it appropriate, because as a private entity it cannot meet the registration requirements of the convention.

I turn to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). I am very grateful that he was able to make the point about Transam and
that this provision has met its requirements. That is very good, and I am pleased that we have been able to support him on that.

The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) raised, as she has throughout the Bill’s passage, the status of trailer registration and the tragic case of Donna and Scott Hussey’s son, Freddie. I hope she agrees that we have done everything we can to engage with her on the case of poor Freddie Hussey. She has made a material improvement to the Bill and has been a tireless campaigner. I am pleased to recognise her work, as I have before.

Let me turn to the points raised by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I am grateful for the constructive way in which she has engaged throughout the Bill’s passage. She raised a concern about methods of selection. It is important to be clear that random selection and first come, first served are included in the Bill not because they are the exclusive methods that will be chosen for selection, but because they are methods that could be seen in law as the Secretary of State not using his or her discretion, which is a general principle of law and would be expected of him or her. We have therefore included those approaches on the face of the Bill to remove any ambiguity as to whether they can be used and to be as transparent as possible. We have been perfectly clear that they will not be used except in the context of a wider application of criteria, as I described in previous stages of the Bill’s passage.

Finally, clause 9 requires the Secretary of State to report on the effect on the UK haulage industry of any EU-related permit scheme, should there be one, throughout a year in which there is a limit on the number of permits available for hauliers travelling to EU member states. Amendment 5, which is identical to one that the hon. Member for York Central tabled in Committee, would make the requirement more precise by requiring any report to include the number of permits requested, granted and refused. I reassured her in Committee that if reports were required, the Government would plan for that to include the number of permits and to be as transparent as possible. We have been perfectly clear that they will not be used except in the context of a wider application of criteria, as I described in previous stages of the Bill’s passage.

On new clause 1, I heard some reassurance from the Minister that community licences might be an outcome of a wider application of criteria, as I described before. I am grateful for the constructive way in which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington has engaged throughout the Bill’s passage, and I am pleased that we have been able to support him on that.

I would not want to embarrass the Minister so early on in his ministerial career by pressing my new clause to a vote and causing him to lose, so I do not intend to do so. He has given some reassurances. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule

Consequential amendments

Amendments made: 1, page 16, line 34, at end insert—

‘4A In section 90A(2) of the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988 (offences in relation to which a financial penalty deposit requirement may be imposed), in paragraph (a)(i), after “vehicle” insert “or trailer”:—

This amendment will ensure that financial penalty deposit requirements may be imposed in respect of offences relating to trailers.’—(Jesse Norman.)

Amendment 3, page 17, line 1, at end insert—

‘5A In Article 91B(2) of the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (S.I. 1996/1320 (N.I. 10)) (offences in relation to which a financial penalty deposit requirement may be imposed), in sub-paragraph (a), after “vehicle” insert “or trailer”:—’—(Jesse Norman.)

The amendment makes provision for Northern Ireland corresponding to Amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Consideration is now completed.

Rachael Maskell: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the exchange we just had, I was not asked whether I wanted to press my amendments to a vote or to withdraw. Is that within order?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes. I listened to what the hon. Lady said during her speech, and she did not move her amendments. It would be normal that, if the hon. Lady—if I had read the debate in such a way as to think that the hon. Lady wished to call a separate Division on one of her amendments, I would have made sure that that could happen. I took advice on whether the hon. Lady intended to ask for a separate Division on one of her amendments, and the advice was that Opposition Front Benchers did not intend to put any amendments to a vote. It is now too late to change that. The hon. Lady looks askance, but perhaps the message from her Front Bench, through other Front Benchers, to the Chair was not clear.

Rachael Maskell rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the hon. Lady would like to make a further point of order, I will allow her to do so, but we cannot change what has happened.

Rachael Maskell: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can see the hesitancy with which you are providing this ruling. I just want to clarify that, at the beginning of my speech in this debate, I did move amendments 4 and 5 formally. I want to put that on the record so there can be no doubt about it.
Madam Deputy Speaker: There is not any doubt about it. The fact that the hon. Lady used the word “move” is not actually sufficient. I ascertained, as the occupant of the Chair always does, whether there was an intention on the part of Opposition Front Benchers to ask for a separate Division on any particular amendment, and the advice—or information; it is not really advice—was very clearly that there was no intention to do so. If the hon. Lady or her colleagues sitting beside her had wished to send a different message, they should have done so through other Front Benchers. There is no misunderstanding. In any case, it is too late to change matters now, because we have come to Third Reading.

Third Reading

6.17 pm

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

I want to say a few words at the concluding stage of the consideration of this Bill. First, I thank all those involved on both sides of the House—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), the Opposition team who have taken part in the debates, the two Committee Chairs and, indeed, all hon. Members who served on the Public Bill Committee.

This is an important Bill. As the Brexit negotiations continue, it is critical that we prepare carefully for our future relationship with the European Union, take all the steps we need to take for all eventualities in negotiations that lie ahead, and make sure we have all the tools that are needed for that future relationship, so that haulage, which is a really important part of our economy, has the tools it needs to be able to carry on crossing borders and delivering the trade that is so essential to this country and to the European Union as a whole. After all, this industry directly employs 300,000 people.

The first part of this Bill will allow us to introduce a road haulage permit scheme covering existing agreements outside the European Union, while also making sure that we have the tools available for any permit-based deal with the European Union, if that is required. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Bill puts in place a legal framework for the Government to establish a system for issuing permits, without placing undue regulation or financial requirements on the industry.

The UK already has several of these in place with non-EU countries. It is important that we have all the tools we may need at the conclusion of the negotiating process and I am very grateful to both Houses of Parliament for expediting this measure. I believe that we have made another step forward in our preparedness process by passing this legislation.

The other part of the legislation gives the Government powers to establish a trailer registration scheme to meet the standards in the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic. That ensures that UK operators can register trailers before entering countries that require such registration—I am referring to HGV trailers, which are an important part of the haulage sector, and not to smaller camping trailers that holidaymakers use. Commercial trailers over 750 kg and all trailers over 3.5 tonnes need to be registered. As with the first part of the Bill, we intend only to recover the costs of running the scheme and not to make a profit.

On the trailer safety measures added in the other place, the Lords made its recommendations and the Government acted on them. We will publish a report on trailer safety within one year of the Bill coming into force.

This is a good Bill and a valuable contribution to the preparations for Brexit. It also puts in place sensible safety measures and a sensible framework for the future of our haulage sector when it comes to the permits and registration required for it to continue to operate in the way we want. I again thank all those involved in the Bill on both sides of the House.

6.20 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for enhancing our parliamentary education by explaining the words, “I move”. We are wiser because of your guidance.

The Opposition recognise the Bill as necessary for Brexit preparations and it is right that the Government prepare for contingencies on leaving the European Union. A failure to retain an essentially unchanged operating environment would damage the UK haulage industry and the wider economy, which is why we believe the Government should continue to use the community licence post Brexit. We hope the measures in the Bill will never be used, but it is imperative that the Government press ahead with their trailer safety review and report to the House next year.

I thank the Government for co-operating with Labour to improve the legislation. I also place on record my thanks to colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and staff both in this House and in the other place whose hard work helped to secure improvements relating to trailer safety and to increase Ministers’ accountability to Parliament in relation to the powers given to the Secretary of State in the Bill.

I heard what the Minister said regarding the allocation of permits. I cannot let the moment pass without adding my note of caution on including such careless words in legislation as “may include first come, first served or an element of random selection”.

Using that sort of language in statute brings us to a poor place.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for her superb campaign on trailer safety following the tragic death of three-year-old Freddie Hussey from her constituency. She has also summoned a safety summit in her constituency, which has been so effective. She will be warmly congratulated by all hon. Members.

Road haulage is vital for the UK economy. Any post-Brexit arrangement that impedes the ease of transit of goods, or that places additional costs or administrative burdens on hauliers, will damage the sector and the wider economy and must be avoided. The haulage industry has been clear about the threat of additional administrative and financial burdens and the risks presented to UK supply chains.

Throughout the Bill’s previous stages, Labour has done all it can to reduce the disruption that would be caused if the measures become necessary, but the...
negotiations will determine how much damage and disruption Brexit will cause to such industries in respect of the retention of the community licensing scheme. Broader issues such as whether we will be part of a customs union and avoid the introduction of customs checks at the border, and the consequent gridlock of our ports and roads, are also a matter for the negotiations. I have visited a number of ports during my time as shadow Secretary of State for Transport and the consequences of failing to retain an unchanged operating environment are stark.

It is concerning that the Government’s calamitous attempts at negotiating Brexit make it increasingly likely that the measures in the Bill will not be a contingency but will be put into effect. Unfortunately, the negotiations are not something we are able to address as a part of the Bill. I do, however, believe we have improved this necessary but hopefully never-to-be-used legislation. Labour will be voting in support.

6.26 pm

Mr John Hayes: I will be very brief. This is an important Bill. As the shadow Secretary of State said, it is a contingency measure. It is a belt and braces exercise to ensure we can guarantee the seamless transport of goods across the continent. There are many hauliers in my constituency and they will be looking at this matter with some concern. It is right to say that Brexit represents a significant change. I take the view that it represents a significant opportunity. None the less, seamless transport and travel are vital, particularly in respect of fresh goods. We live in a just-in-time age, where the movement of goods in very quick order is necessary to meet the spirit that it has been created as a result of that culture.

The measure, which we do not expect to come into force, is none the less important to achieve those objectives. It is the right thing for the Government to do. Had the Government failed to bring something of this kind forward, Opposition Members and others would have perfectly reasonably said that we were not being sufficiently diligent. The diligence associated with a proper approach to the defence of the interests of hauliers and others obliges the Bill we are considering tonight. It is in that spirit that it has been considered through time.

I want to pay particular attention to the points made earlier by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and, if I may do so on her behalf, reiterate them. It seems to me important that the Government recognise that it will be necessary to review the provisions should they come into force and it would be perfectly reasonable for Government Ministers to confirm that that might happen. I do not think it necessarily needs to be on the face of the Bill, but it is perfectly reasonable for Ministers to give her an assurance, as a result of the compelling argument she made earlier, that that kind of process will occur. It is what good Governments do: they consider measures carefully, check how they are working in practice and commit to looking at them again if and when necessary.

Similarly, to re-emphasise a point I made earlier—many of the points I make in this House are worth amplification, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker—it is important that the methodology for the allocation of permits is what it needs to be. It should not be merely what is suggested here, as the shadow Secretary of State and others said, and the hon. Member for York Central emphasised. It may well take a very different shape from that which is identified here. It is therefore very important that the Government are very flexible about what needs to be done to allocate permits in a way that is efficient and effective.

Andy McDonald: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that, while it may well be right to retain flexibility on the allocation of permits, to put in the Bill that they could be allocated on a first come, first served basis could mean people in sleeping bags waiting for permits to be handed out or some random selection? This is serious stuff. Should we really be using such vague and indeterminate language in the Bill?

Mr Hayes: In an ideal world, where I was still sitting on the Government Front Bench—I know that is most people’s ideal—I would have to respond to that point formally on behalf of the Government. As I no longer have those responsibilities, I will leave it to those who are now missioned to deal with these matters formally to respond.

The Secretary of State has done the right thing in bringing the Bill forward. As I said earlier, had he not done so, he would have been criticised. I do not expect it to be used, but it will provide considerable reassurance to hauliers and others. We are constantly told by the critics of Brexit that the biggest problem of all is uncertainty. Well, this Bill is not uncertain, but it is about doing what is necessary to alleviate uncertainty by dealing with the matter with appropriate diligence and salience. To that end, the Bill has my full support.

There is one final thing: I say to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that to come to the party late, improperly dressed, and to not understand what a trailer registration scheme really means is not clever or wise, and he would be better not to come to the party at all if he is going to make such a mess of it. With that cutting aside, I conclude my remarks.

6.30 pm

Alan Brown: As we have heard, road haulage is important for businesses in the UK and for keeping the supply of goods and food to our shores, so, like others, I am happy to support the legislation. It is sensible to have back-up arrangements in place.

However, now that I have heard some of the contributions on Third Reading, suddenly this legislation seems way more important and detailed than I realised. I thought it was quite simple—particularly on haulage permits to allow lorry drivers to register and possibly travel—but now I am hearing that it is giving great certainty about “no deal” that they will be able to walk away with in March 2019. I suggest that some Government Members need to stop kidding themselves on. Apart from that, I support the Bill’s Third Reading.
Andrew Jones: I want to say a few quick words in support of the Bill and the sector. The road haulage industry is hugely important to the United Kingdom. It does the heavy lifting of goods around our country and because it works so well and so smoothly, it is frequently taken for granted.

There are 320,000 HGV drivers employed in the UK, and in terms of the workforce, that goes up to around 2.5 million when we include the broader haulage and logistics industry. Road haulage is the main means of moving goods around the UK and it plays a huge role in our exports. Over 3.5 million road goods vehicles left the UK for Europe last year. We have been talking about the implications for exporting. The goods that we rely on, our food and drink, and the stock for our nation’s high streets—much of what we export—are moved by trucks and the workforce that drives them. Those goods are stored in warehouses and managed by the logistics teams who ensure that they are where we need them when we need them.

The Bill deals with a critical part of the UK economy and is about making sure that whatever happens in our Brexit negotiations, the Government will be able to deliver a smooth Brexit. This Bill is about preparations that may never be needed—indeed, I hope they are not. We do not know what the deal will be, so while the negotiations are progressing, it is right for the Government to plan for different eventualities. It is about creating the capacity to develop background systems, and about doing so in collaboration and consultation with the industry. We saw that with the addition in the House of Lords of a consultation clause, which was very positive.

We have liberalised access for haulage and the Government are working to maintain that, but it is right to have the contingency, which is what the Bill is about.

I have experienced the sector both as a Minister and prior to that, in my working career, and I know just how important it is to have smooth operation and a successful future for this critical part of the UK economy. The Government are to be commended for planning ahead and taking the necessary precautions for whatever Brexit may bring. That is why I will support the Bill; I urge everyone to do so.

6.34 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I rise to get more clarity and commitments from the Minister, specifically on road safety and reducing loss of life. It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I will focus on towbar failure and substandard trailers.

On the compulsory registration of trailers, I remain concerned that a non-commercial trailer weighing between 750 kg and 3.5 tonnes can be on the road without being subject to routine safety checks. Given that vehicles over 3.5 tonnes are regularly tested, it seems logical for trailers that are, say, 3.4 tonnes, or even 1 tonne, to be subject to regular checks. Accidents with trailers of such a size could easily cause serious injury or death, as we have seen throughout the Bill’s passage. Provision for regular testing would help to shape the behaviour of road users, giving them greater responsibility for the maintenance of their vehicles.

Some very heavy trailers, perhaps even weighing 3.4 tonnes, sit off-road without maintenance, potentially for months or years, before being taken on a road or motorway without any formal scrutiny. That presents a potentially deadly risk to road users and pedestrians. The Minister has spoken about the opportunity the Bill presents for raising public awareness of safety issues. Can he provide any detail of his thoughts on what an education and public awareness campaign might look like? I welcome the commitment he has given to extend testing for all trailers over 750 kg if recommended by the report provided for under clause 20, but that does not go far enough.

We have an opportunity with the Bill to ensure that all trailers over 750 kg are registered on a compulsory basis. Such an intervention would help to prevent serious accidents and deaths on our roads. Regular checks would increase the likelihood of a culture change, leading to owners of heavy trailers taking more responsibility for the safety and roadworthiness of their vehicles. The Minister has said that the report will make recommendations on whether regulations should be extended for compulsory registration for trailers weighing more than 750 kg. Will he say where he believes the threshold of acceptable risk lies, and at which point he believes all trailers should be registered on a compulsory basis? Will he make a personal commitment to extend regulation, without delay, to all trailers over 750 kg at the point the threshold is crossed?

On towbars, we have during the Bill’s passage heard compelling information about the potential lack of compliance with towbar safety regulations. Specifically, I refer again to the National Trailer and Towing Association’s findings that 91% of inspections carried out as part of its free towbar check failed to meet adequate safety requirements. The Minister knows that the Rotherham Towing Centre in my constituency is the second facility in the UK to be accredited by Horizon Global. Customers using such accredited centres have the assurance that a towbar fitted to their vehicle is safe.

There are, however, currently no legal requirements for towbars to be fitted by qualified professionals. There are not even specific standards with which the tow hitches and their fitting must be aligned. The examination at the MOT stage has a very high threshold for failure. In Committee, the Minister rightly said it was important to differentiate between small numbers of ‘data and evidence. To that end, I am pleased that the Government have agreed to report on the compliance of existing provisions for the installation of towbars. Given the agreed need for good evidence-based policy making, does the Minister agree that the report should include details on the number and causes of road traffic accidents involving towbars, as well as the already agreed trailers, under clause 20? He expressed concern that it might not be realistic to retrospectively assess accidents for which data had not been recorded. Will he commit to reporting on accidents involving towbars going forward?

I note that the Minister has said that the level of recorded towbar defects is very low, but staff at my local garage, RH Motors, which does MOT testing, said that the threshold for giving notification of a problem with a towbar is very high. The Minister has stated that he would consider the guidance for staff at MOT stations on the threshold for reporting faulty towbars. What steps has he taken to review this for future guidance issues?

Finally, on the inspection protocol, the Minister has said that if an extension of periodic testing is proposed to cover all trailers, it would be appropriate for that to examine the tow connection on the trailer itself.
Given the concerning evidence suggesting that many towbars and hitches that are examined are not safe, and given that most are not examined at all, does he agree that it would be more prudent to introduce periodic testing for all towbars without delay?

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

STANDING ORDERS (CONSIDERATION OF ESTIMATES)

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) shall apply for the remainder of this Session as if, for the word ‘Three’ in line 1, there were substituted the word ‘Five’.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

PETITIONS

Mr Speaker: I call Leo Docherty. Where is the chappie? We have reached petitions rather earlier than is commonplace and the hon. Gentleman is not in his place. However, Mr Martyn Day, who has a petition, is in his place, and we will now hear from him.

Gap in Educational Attainment

6.40 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the pupils and staff of Deanburn Primary School, which I was happy to visit last Friday to collect from the children there their sign to send to the Prime Minister to make schools safe, and I collected 231 of the signs, which will be making their way now to the Prime Minister’s office. I was very touched by the commitment of the young people to speak up for the right to education of children worldwide. They have also produced a petition, which I present tonight.

The petition states:

The petition of pupils and staff of Deanburn Primary School, Declares that the petitioners believe that the gap in educational attainment across the globe is deplorable; further that schools need to be a safe and peaceful haven where children are free to learn and flourish; yet 264 million young people are denied this right worldwide.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the “Send my Friend to School” campaign forms a key aspect of the UK Government’s international development programme and ensure that every child in the world receives a quality education to reach their full potential.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002160]

Medical cannabis oil

6.41 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I rise to present my petition on cannabis oil for medical use. The inspiration for it has been an incredibly engaging online petition started by my constituent, Paul Keeney. It was started by Paul from his hospital bed during his ongoing battle with an extremely rare and aggressive form of cancer. His petition calls for cannabis oil to be used medically and legally in the UK, and has to this day been signed by 288,161 people on change.org. In presenting this petition I would like to pay deep personal respect to Paul for his bravery and courage and that of his family. The petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the Government to legalise cannabis oil for medical use in the United Kingdom.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that it is an injustice that sufferers of long term and terminal illness in the United Kingdom are currently unable to legally access Cannabis Oil for medical use which may in many cases be their only relief from pain or suffering; further that an online petition by Wansbeck Constituent, Paul Keeney, which has gathered the support of over 280,000 signatories in its calls for the Government to legalise Cannabis Oil for medical use; further that the Government should listen to these calls and immediately act on reforming legislation which currently prevents cannabis oil being used in medical treatment in the United Kingdom; and further that in support of that petition and the work of Paul Keeney, this petition seeks to bring the attention of the Government to this important issue and further call for immediate action to be taken to legalise Cannabis Oil for Medical Use.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to legalise Cannabis Oil for medical use in the United Kingdom.

And the petitioners remain, etc.] [P002161]

Mr Speaker: I have noted, and colleagues will have noted, that the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has now beetled into the Chamber, admittedly earlier than the time at which he would have originally expected to present his petition. It is a tad out of sequence, but no matter: we will wish to hear the hon. Gentleman present his petition.

Protection for British Service Personnel

6.43 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I rise with gratitude.

The outrageous legal pursuit of veterans of Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan is a national disgrace. If the bond of trust between the Government and our armed forces, which is critical to our national security, is to be maintained, our servicemen and women must know that the state is on their side. This petition has been signed by some 6,165 residents of Aldershot and the wider United Kingdom. I am pleased to present this public petition to the House of Commons on this, the second day of Armed Forces Week, in the hope that the Government will act.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of Aldershot and the wider United Kingdom, Declares that urgent action must be taken by the Government to protect British Military veterans from spurious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Government to immediately legislate for the Statute of Limitations that will prevent British Military veterans of the conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and other overseas combat operations suffering spurious and vexatious historic allegations and repeated prosecutions.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Derek Thomas: I am quite impressed by that intervention. It was quite a thing to hear, and I am sure that it will go on public record and that people will refer to it in future.

I have raised this issue with the Chancellor of the Exchequer since I was elected in 2015. I have raised it with three separate Secretaries to the Treasury, and I raised it once again just a couple of weeks ago in a debate in Parliament. I have a simple ask: every property that has been built as a home should pay council tax. I argue that the Government should close this loophole, allowing the authority to collect the council tax charge to provide public service and enabling the Government to divert cash towards the provision of homes for local families.

I remember—I was a counsellor and a parliamentary candidate in St Ives at the time—when business rate relief was introduced. It was clearly done to support our high streets and, for many, it has had a significant benefit. However, I do not believe for a minute that that relief was ever intended to create a route to enable a homeowner to avoid paying council tax, or business rates when a property is used as a business. Do not get me wrong: I am well aware of the contribution that tourism makes to the economy of Cornwall and Scilly— to the local economy, through the jobs it provides and through all the contributions that allow our high streets to have a fighting chance of survival—and I recognise the role that holiday lets play in supporting the sector. I am not seeking to oppress the tourism sector but to install some fairness in the housing system and identify some much-needed cash that can be used to provide the homes that my constituents and constituents across Cornwall need.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing an exceptional job of talking about this issue, which is important for many of my constituents and his. Has he thought about how it might be implemented on the ground so that Cornwall Council and other local authorities can benefit for the personal benefit of the taxpayer?

Derek Thomas: That is why I believe that this is an opportunity for the Government to simplify council tax. If they know that every property built as a residential property is due for a council tax charge, surely that simplifies it. What the Government then decide to do about whether the properties are registered for business rates or not should be left to someone far brighter than I am. I am glad that I have two Cornish colleagues in the Chamber and that other Cornish colleagues support this campaign—

Bob Stewart: Not just Cornwall—

Steve Double: But an honorary Cornishman.

Derek Thomas: No, not just Cornwall, but we work closely together as a team, fighting for Cornwall in all sorts of ways. I am proud to be in a county where the six MPs work so closely together on such important issues, helping us to maintain good local communities and a fair society.

I am also asking the Government to see what powers local authorities can be given to collect an additional council tax premium of up to an additional 100% from second homes that would be ring-fenced for investment in local housing stock. These powers are already available to authorities for empty homes and it may be sensible to extend them to second home owners given the pressures on authorities to provide housing for local families. If the money is collected from second home owners and used to build homes for local families, that would do a great deal to create harmony and unity in our communities.

I know from the second home owners who live near me—down the lane on which I live, three of the nine properties are owned by them—that they buy properties in Cornwall because they love the communities, want to contribute to those communities and want to be part of the life there while they are on a break. I know that they want good public services, so I do not believe for a minute that they would object to contributing more if the Government were to allow local authorities to do that in a sensible and proactive way.

Earlier this year, I met the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government with the Council of the Isles of Scilly, where there is a real problem with second homes—195 properties in a community of just 2,200 people are locked up and often visited for only a few weeks a year. That has a depressing effect on the housing market, so when the council looks to create skilled jobs and attract nurses and people to work in schools and public services, housing is not available for them. The council has asked to be able to increase council tax on second homes by much more than 100% to free up the property market and start making houses available for the people who are needed to work on the islands.

Bob Stewart: For the vast majority of the year, perhaps six months, holiday lets are empty. Surely, as things stand, council tax can be put on the properties when they are empty.

Derek Thomas: As the rules stand, if a property is advertised for let for a certain number of weeks a year, it can be registered as a business and exempted from council tax and business rates. It is not necessarily required for people to be in the building during that time, as long as it is advertised as available for let. My hon. Friend is right, but I do not want to complicate the issue further, simply saying that council tax is applicable to every house built for residential purposes would reduce many of the headaches that people might have at the moment.

The other additional benefit of applying council tax to every property is that communities like Steve and Mousehole. [Laughter.] I say “Steve” because of your point earlier. Sorry, not your point, Mr Speaker—although it was a good point you made—but the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double).

The other additional benefit of applying council tax to every property is that communities like St Ives and Mousehole, which have a large number of holiday lets,
could benefit from simplified and inclusive waste collection. Currently, because of the concern that the users of second homes in places like St Ives are abusing the system and using the bins provided for genuine local residents who pay council tax, Cornwall Council has removed some of the bins and is refusing to collect some of the rubbish.

Recycling, refuse and how we look after waste is a big issue in St Ives, and I have a big meeting on Friday to identify the issues. The local community will put forward a plan and I will work with Cornwall Council to deliver it. I have been working on the situation for three years, and bins that were available for residents who pay council tax have been taken away because it was deemed that they were being abused by people who own holiday lets and local restaurateurs, which has caused real hardship for elderly people. In parts of St Ives, and in other parts of my constituency where holiday lets are numerous, the people who are left are often older people who are less mobile, and they are having real difficulties in getting rid of their rubbish.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I can well understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but doubling the tax on people’s second homes will impact on the attraction of second homes in such areas. Does he agree that much more thought is needed before implementing the draconian step of doubling council tax? That could be the death knell for the holiday industry in one area while opening up interest in other areas that do not introduce such a tax, like my constituency of Strangford.

Derek Thomas: I clarify that I am talking about second homes that are not available for let. There are properties where I live that are owned by people who might live not far from here in Westminster and who go to Cornwall for a few weeks a year as a holiday. That is absolutely fine, and they choose to contribute a great deal to the local community, but what I am proposing is that the Government look at giving the council powers to increase tax if it so chooses, if doing so would be beneficial to the area and if it would deliver homes for local families. If local authorities believe such a power would have no benefit to their area, they would hopefully choose not to apply it.

Jim Shannon: What I am saying is that there will be differences of opinion on those who buy second homes for their own use and who do not rent them out. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that one council could implement the tax while other councils do not? How will that work?

Derek Thomas: That is a fair point, because we would be dispersing the problem. I completely accept that point, and it is not something I have considered a great deal. In my constituency and across Cornwall, we are fairly sea-locked, so there would not be great competition from neighbouring counties. There is a particular issue for us in Cornwall, because once the houses are gone, they are gone and it is not easy to get a property nearby. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point that needs thinking through properly.

At the moment, I am primarily asking the Government to consider applying council tax to every residential property. If every property paid council tax, every property would be entitled to the local authority’s refuse collection service. That would reduce the need to have several different companies providing the same service in a community such as St Ives, where the roads are tricky to navigate in the middle of winter, let alone in summer, when lots of tourists are around. As I said, I am holding a meeting in St Ives later this week to try to get to the bottom of this problem and to make sensible proposals for reducing the waste we have and dealing with the waste we produce. If we can apply council tax across the board and if properties—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Derek Thomas: If every property’s rubbish was collected at the same time by the refuse collection company, that would reduce vehicle movements and congestion in our tourist areas, which are often not built for large vehicles at the best of times.

In summary, I believe that asking for council tax to be paid on every property would provide a significant boost to funds which could be used to help to provide the extra housing a growing population so desperately needs and to ensure we have the services we need. One area has probably not been considered: we are concerned about our policing budgets and we have had many conversations in this place and in constituencies around the country about them. We have had many conversations about the support that local parish and town councils should have. If we were to apply council tax in the way I suggest, it would increase the funds available to provide these services to make our communities safer and help our towns and parishes provide the services we all want. I am sure that everybody concerned would welcome that opportunity. I thank Mr Speaker for giving me this opportunity to speak.

7.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing this debate. The issue of second homes is a subject that I know he cares about passionately and has raised repeatedly in the House. It is right that he voices his constituents’ views on this topic, for they deal with the issue of second homes more than most. When we look at the percentage of a local authority’s housing stock accounted for by second homes, we find that the Isles of Scilly ranks second among authorities in England and Cornwall ranks 13th. I have some personal familiarity with this issue, due to the reasonably high prevalence of second homes in my rural constituency of Richmond (Yorks), especially in the Yorkshire Dales national park. As we heard, in areas where the number of second homes comprises a significant proportion of the housing market, there is a risk that local people, particularly those who might be looking for their first home, might be priced out of the local market. There are legitimate concerns about the effect on local services, as well as on community cohesion.

However, it is also important that we do not lose sight of the benefits of second homes: the boost they can give to local economies and the tourism trade. Many local
livelihoods will depend on tourism. This Government are not in the business of removing people’s right to choose where they want to purchase property. There can, of course, be many reasons for owning more than one property. Although second homes are frequently referred to as “holiday homes”, they can just as easily be properties that enable someone to work in and contribute to the local economy of an area, while being able to return to a family home in another part of the country on a regular basis.

However, we do recognise the concerns, which have been set out so clearly by my hon. Friend in this debate. As such, I would like to highlight for the House the impact of second homes in affected areas and pass on more benefits to local residents. Let me start with the second home discount. The Government inherited a situation where second homes were automatically entitled to council tax discounts. There was a presumption that those who do not use local services for much of the year should pay less, but we shifted away from that approach. From 2013, the law was changed so that local authorities were no longer required to offer council tax discounts in this way, allowing them to target any discounts as necessary, according to their particular circumstances. I am pleased to report that that change has made a difference. Last year, no local authorities still offered blanket exemptions for second homes; nearly a third of billing authorities offered no discount at all on second homes; and, perhaps most clearly, fully 92% of second homes were charged the full rate of council tax.

Secondly, although that was a positive step, we have gone further. Beyond council tax, the Government raised stamp duty rates for those buying second homes. Since April 2016, anyone who has purchased a second home has paid a stamp duty charge of three percentage points above the current rates. Since then, more than half a million people have bought their first home, and first-time buyers now make up an increased share of the mortgage property market. It is worth noting the other significant support for first-time buyers, in the form of the total completion of the need to pay stamp duty on homes worth up to £300,000, which will benefit many people in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives. Friend the Member for St Ives.

Thirdly, the community housing fund is helping to channel funds back into local communities. It has allocated part of the additional revenue raised from the higher stamp duty rates to areas with the potential to deliver community-led housing. That specifically includes areas with high rates of second-home ownership. Community-led housing is affordable at local income levels and is almost exclusively additional to any housing developed by other sectors, because it is brought forward on sites that would not normally be granted planning permission to speculative house builders.

The community housing fund has provided revenue and capital funding for numerous schemes since 2016, as I have seen at first hand in my own constituency, where the Hudswell community centre used the funds to develop affordable homes for people with local connections to that village. I was delighted to open up the homes and see how the scheme had enabled tenants with strong family ties to the local area to move in. I am aware of other shining examples throughout the country. Indeed, in the first round of the scheme, Cornwall received £5 million to support community housing projects, including the Cornwall Community Land Trust, which I am sure was welcomed by my hon. Friend and others across Cornwall.

Fourthly, through neighbourhood plans, communities have the direct power to develop a shared vision for the future of their areas. Over 590 such plans have been completed so far. The plans allow communities to make decisions on where new homes, shops and offices should be built, what they should look like, and what facilities and infrastructure should be provided. I am delighted that the Government have committed more than £20 million to support communities in the development of neighbourhood plans over the next few years.

Through the neighbourhood-plan process, residents can develop plans that manage second-home ownership of new builds. We are aware that communities in areas such as Cornwall and Northumberland have put in place neighbourhood plans with such restrictions. Indeed, one of the more well-known plans that does exactly that is in my hon. Friend’s constituency of St Ives, where new open-market housing is permitted only where there is a restriction to ensure its occupancy as a principal residence. It is quite right that local residents should have the opportunity to express their views on the design of their areas and ultimately to approve neighbourhood plans via a referendum.

Lastly, my hon. Friend expressed his concern about the possibility that some second-homeowners may be registering their properties for business rates rather than council tax. Indeed, I have discussed this issue not just with my hon. Friend, but with my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), among others.

Holiday lets are a valuable part of the local business landscape in many communities. It is absolutely right that such genuine businesses should pay business rates and, as such, be able to avail themselves of small business rate relief, where appropriate. In the case of holiday-let accommodation, the properties are assessed for business rates rather than council tax if they are currently available for short-term lets for 140 days or more per financial year. This rule is widely understood and provides a clear method of deciding whether a property should be liable for council tax or business rates. It also ensures that properties do not switch between the two systems year to year merely due to success in letting out the property.

However, I assure all hon. Members that the Government take any suggestion of council tax avoidance or gaming extremely seriously wherever it occurs. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives is absolutely right to point out the potential impact on his area. A reflection of this is that 17% of all holiday lets registered for business rates in England are to be found in Cornwall, and 97% of those have rateable values of £12,000 or below, so may potentially be eligible for small business rate relief.

Bob Stewart: I thank both you, Mr Speaker, and my hon. Friend for also allowing me to intervene. Does a business rate raised on a holiday let go to the local council or to central Government? In other words, if it is roughly the same as council tax, does the local council get the same amount?
Rishi Sunak: In general, business rates are split between central and local government. Depending on the particular area, that share may be more or less, but a rough rule of thumb is 50:50. Obviously, the particular question that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked as to the level of difference between the two will depend on the rateable value of a typical business. The thing to bear in mind, as I said, is that 97% of holiday lets registered in Cornwall, for example, have a rateable value below £12,000, which means that they will be eligible for small business rate relief and to pay no business rates at all, and therein lies the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives highlighted.

Clearly, if these properties ought not to be eligible for business, rates this could represent a financial loss to both the local and central Exchequer and that would not be fair. I know that there are different approaches to how such properties are taxed. Wales is a case in point. There, such properties must provide evidence of actual letting in the previous year in order to be valued for business rates, rather than for council tax. There may indeed be merits to such an approach, and I am happy to listen to views and ideas on this.

I very much understand the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives has raised. As he knows, I have been looking at this issue for some time and have tasked my officials to investigate this matter in detail, and especially to speak to their counterparts in Wales about their experience there to see whether we should change the criteria under which holiday lets are valued for business rates. Whichever approach is taken, it is crucial that we strike a balance between ensuring that properties pay the right tax at the right level, and also ensuring that genuine small businesses receive the reliefs that they deserve.

To conclude, I have explained the wide-ranging measures that this Government have put in place to deal with the issues raised by second homes—from abolishing mandatory council tax discounts to increasing stamp duty rates, and from allocating funds to community-led local affordable housing to supporting neighbourhood planning. I hope that hon. Members will agree that the Government have been proactive in this area. However, ever restless to ensure that we are taking all sensible steps to address any issues, I am also examining the particular concern raised by my hon. Friend with regard to business rates and look forward to reporting back on this issue to him and to other Members in due course.

I end where I started: by commending my hon. Friend for so tenaciously and passionately continuing to raise this vital issue for his constituents. He is making a real difference to them by putting their issues directly on the Government’s agenda, and I know that he will continue to do exactly that in the days and months to come.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned.
The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Member for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Outsourcing: Value for Money

1. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the value for money of outsourcing public services.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Member for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Recent business cases submitted by Departments for approval show savings to taxpayers from outsourcing in the range of 9% to 30%.

Afzal Khan: A recent Public Accounts Committee report found that after more than 25 years the Treasury still has no data on whether the private finance initiative model provides value for money. People in my constituency are concerned about back-door privatisation and the kinds of PFI contract often used in hospitals, which leave staff in the dark, not knowing about the security of their jobs. Will the Minister review PFI contracts and privatisation across all Departments in the light of the PAC report’s findings?

Mr Lidington: Let us consider this: “It simply would not have been possible to build or refurbish such a number of schools and hospitals without using the PFI model.”—[Official Report, 14 November 2007; Vol. 467, c. 665.] Those are not my words, but those of Gordon Brown, the last Labour Prime Minister.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend might be aware of a petition in Gibraltar for it to have an MP elected to our Parliament. The petition now has close to 10,000 signatures, which is almost half the electorate of the rock. Will he therefore consider backing my private Member’s Bill to give Gibraltar the option of electing an MP to this place and reward Gibraltararians for their unwavering loyalty?

Mr Speaker: That is an extreme case of shoe-horning in a particular concern, but it suffers from the disadvantage of bearing absolutely no relation to the question on the Order Paper. The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his own inimitable and mildly eccentric way, and we are grateful to him for doing so. Let us have a question that is in order.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a serious point, many of my constituents were affected by the collapse of Carillion. How confident is the Minister that the big four accountancy firms have learnt their lessons for the future?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, criticisms have been made of the major accountancy firms by Select Committees of this House and others. The appropriate financial services regulator keeps this under review, and it is for the regulator to decide what, if any, steps to take.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): With 2,300 jobs down the pan and the taxpayer paying £148 million to clean up the Carillion fiasco, how can the Minister give such complacent responses on value for money? Will he now admit that earlier Front-Bench assurances from those on his side of the House that the burden of Carillion’s collapse would not fall on the taxpayer have turned out to be incorrect?

Mr Lidington: No. I would not accept that at all. We have said from the start that our priority has been to keep public services running. We have paid the costs of the official receiver to enable the contracted operations to continue; the schools have been cleaned, and the meals have been served in schools and hospitals, by those providers. It is the lenders, directors and shareholders in Carillion who have taken the big financial hit, and rightly so.

Jon Trickett: The fact of the matter is that the Minister has admitted that £150 million has been paid to the liquidators. We see that his commitment to value for money has no credibility when we consider that only one civil servant is monitoring 700 taxpayer-funded contracts, with £60 billion in assets. The Government are sleepwalking from one outsourcing disaster to the next. Will he now accept the widespread public view that he should abandon his obsession with outsourcing?

Mr Lidington: The report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy concluded that the directors, not the Government, were responsible for the fact that Carillion failed and that the Government had made a competent job of clearing up the mess. I refer the hon. Gentleman again to the fact that independent research commissioned by the last Labour Government showed savings to taxpayers of, on average, between 20% and 30% from outsourcing, compared with undertaking tasks in house. That is money that can go back into frontline public services.

Voter ID Pilots

2. Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): Whether he has made an assessment of the operation of recent voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement.

7. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Whether he has made an assessment of the operation of recent voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement.
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): We are encouraged by the data from the returning officers and the statements they have made indicating that the pilots were a successful test of the implementation of voter ID. The Electoral Commission will publish its evaluation in July and the Cabinet Office will conclude its own evaluation at the same time.

Adam Holloway: Does the Minister agree that additional measures should be brought in, given that the issue affects the vulnerable, the elderly and, in my constituency, ethnic minorities?

Chloe Smith: I welcome my hon. Friend’s commitment, which I share, to helping voters to be able to cast their ballots in a way that also protects the integrity of the wider system. Let us never forget that that is not only an individual advantage, but in the collective interest.

James Morris: Following the recent trials in this year’s local elections, the Minister will be aware that local authorities such as Woking recorded a 99.7% success rate on voters bringing the correct ID. Does she agree that that demonstrates that we should consider rolling this out further to secure the integrity of the ballot?

Chloe Smith: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely the case. The measures that we piloted at the local elections just past were reasonable and proportionate and have been shown to have worked. Furthermore, other countries already do this without problem. The overwhelming majority of people were able to cast their votes in these pilots without any issue. I look forward to considering the best next steps, informed by those pilots.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What problems were there with the pilots?

Chloe Smith: I am sure that the Electoral Commission will provide those who look for problems with a little bit of data to chew on, but the point is this: it seems to me that the Labour party is looking for problems. Actually, most voters regard this as a reasonable and sensible step that protects our democracy.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): We agree about the importance of preventing voter fraud and other electoral malpractice. The Electoral Commission ruled that Leave.EU breached spending limits and other rules, fined the organisation and reported its responsible person to the police. What steps are the Government taking to address that and how will the Minister ensure that the issue of cheating in the Brexit referendum is pursued?

Chloe Smith: As you will know, Mr Speaker, given your role in connection with it, the Electoral Commission is an independent body. I am not able to respond at this point to questions about investigations that it is undertaking.

Government Procurement: Small Businesses

3. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of small businesses in Government procurement.

10. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of small businesses in Government procurement.

11. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of small businesses in Government procurement.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and we are determined to continue to level the playing field so that they can compete for Government contracts. That is why in April I announced a number of measures to help achieve that and have recently met the Government’s strategic suppliers and Ministers in several Departments to ensure that those measures are delivered.

James Duddridge: I thank the Minister for that reply. Specifically, how will coastal towns such as Southend-on-Sea benefit from the changes in this procurement procedure?

Oliver Dowden: As my hon. Friend will know, small businesses generate more than 16 million jobs and we are determined to level the playing field so that those in coastal towns such as Southend get their fair share of prosperity and win Government contracts. I encourage businesses in Southend to look on Contracts Finder, on which more than 17,000 small businesses are already registered, for procurement opportunities.

Chris Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we have a vibrant and mixed group of suppliers and small businesses from all corners of the UK, including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and that they should all be considered equally in the procurement process?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is crucial to ensure that we have a diverse supplier base. We have made a number of changes to the Government procurement processes to assist small businesses, including requiring prime contractors to advertise subcontracting opportunities on the Government Contracts Finder. We also divide contracts into separate lots, including by region, when that makes commercial sense.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for his responses. As seen from my recent work on the Public Accounts Committee, there sometimes appears to be a conflict between large strategic suppliers who see themselves as aggregators of several procurement contracts for small business and other instances in which small businesses would like to get certain contracts directly from Government. Will he explain the Government’s thinking on how to balance those two approaches?

Oliver Dowden: We already require buying authorities to disaggregate contracts so that small and medium-sized enterprises can compete. However, there will, of course, be contracts in which disaggregation would affect value for money. That is why we recently announced that when large contractors are successful, they will be required to advertise those subcontracting opportunities on Contracts Finder, so that small businesses can bid.
Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the cost implications where outsourced contracts have been overturned by the High Court because of incompetent procurement processes? I refer specifically to the expensive mess created by Conservative-controlled Lancashire County Council in connection with a Virgin contract for children’s services.

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Lady will know, the Cabinet Office has extensive processes to ensure successful procuring. If she is questioning the overall purpose of procuring, I refer her to the comments made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office. In addition, research shows that public authorities save at least 11% by contracting out services. That means more money for health and education.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister referred to small businesses as the backbone of our economy. What plans does he have over this Parliament to strengthen that backbone and increase targets in terms of accessibility of procurement for small businesses?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. In the previous Parliament, we set and met a target of 25% of all Government procurement going to small businesses. We set a challenging target in this Parliament of a third of all procurement going to small businesses. I am taking a number of steps to help us to try to achieve that.

6. [906090] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Thirty thousand Carillion suppliers are owed £2 billion in unpaid invoices. When will Ministers enforce the prompt payment rules for Government contracts and stand up for small businesses, or is the reality that under this Prime Minister the Conservatives really are the anti-business party?

Oliver Dowden: We are absolutely committed to prompt payment. That is why the Government pay over 96% of their suppliers within 30 days. In respect of application to contracting, I have just announced a consultation to ensure we can exclude contractors if they fail to pay small businesses on time.

House of Lords

4. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): When the Government plan to respond to the report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the size of the House of Lords.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Prime Minister responded to the Lord Speaker’s Committee on 20 February. In her response, she committed to do her bit to address the size of the House of Lords by continuing the restrained approach she has so far shown to appointments.

Martyn Day: Thanks to the Minister’s actions during the debate here on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, the couple of minutes that Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town had on devolution was more than all the devoted MPs got collectively. Does the Minister think it acceptable that unelected Members of the House of Lords had more opportunity to debate the Government’s redrawing of the devolution settlement than any elected Member from Scotland?

Chloe Smith: As you will know, Mr Speaker, because you spent many hours in the Chair, we spent several hundred hours debating the Bill. I am proud that it has attained Royal Assent. I think we can all agree that that will provide greater certainty to businesses and citizens as we exit the EU. It is a shame that the Scottish National party seems not to be interested in that.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that the House of Lords would be vastly improved if it was smaller and democratic?

Chloe Smith: I echo what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said about the role we see for the House of Lords: it should continue as a scrutinising Chamber but respect the primacy of the Commons, which certainly is the democratically elected Chamber.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Does the Minister really think that next week’s by-election, with 31 electors who are the children and grandchildren of people who got there illegitimately, is, in a modern democracy, the right way to elect Members of Parliament in another place?

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is an experienced Labour Member of Parliament, so he might recall that Labour had a hand in the legislation that guides this process. He will also recall that the Conservative party won the general election on a manifesto that said it would not prioritise reform of the House of Lords.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Never mind the House of Lords. When are we going to see this House reduced to 600?

Mr Speaker: It is all very well the hon. Gentleman breezily declaring, “Never mind about the House of Lords.” The question, inconveniently for him, is focused on the House of Lords. Generosity gets the better of me, however, and I am itching to hear the ministerial reply.

Chloe Smith: Mr Speaker, I think the simplest answer is that the Boundary Commission will return with its proposals shortly and the House will have the pleasure of looking at them.

Senior Public Appointments: Widening Access

5. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to widen access to senior public appointments.

13. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps he is taking to widen access to senior public appointments.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We want to ensure that public boards represent the people they serve. That is why in December we launched our diversity action plan, which committed to 50% women and 14% ethnic minority representation by 2020. Just last month, I appointed Lord Christopher...
Holmes to undertake a review of removing barriers that disabled people might face when applying for public appointments.

Vicky Foxcroft: What proportion of appointments made to public bodies are people from working-class backgrounds and what proportion went to private school?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady raises a very important point about our making sure that public appointments reflect the country as a whole. That is why we have taken a number of measures to increase diversity based on the Bridge report recommendations.

Chris Elmore: I am sure that the Minister agrees that we have a huge amount of talent for public appointments, including in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, so will he set out what he is doing to ensure that regional voices are heard around senior public appointments?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Diversity means not just ethnic diversity or gender diversity, but regional diversity. That is why, for example, we recently held an event in Glasgow to encourage people in Scotland to apply for public appointments.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One way in which we could widen public appointments is to limit the amount of them to just two per person, instead of the gravy train that seems to appear as far as public appointments are concerned.

Oliver Dowden: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and I take on board his recommendation. Diversity also means ensuring that we do not have the same old faces constantly applying for and succeeding in winning public appointments. That is why, as part of our diversity measures, we are encouraging a wider array of people to apply for public appointments.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think that online abuse acts as a deterrent to people putting themselves forward not just for elected office, but for public appointments? Does he also agree that such abuse should be dealt with robustly and that we all have a responsibility to call it out?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we will be launching a consultation shortly to deal with exactly that point.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Edward Timpson was appointed chair of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and of the new Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. Andrew Tyrie has been appointed chair of the Competition and Markets Authority. Baroness Stowell was appointed chair of the Charity Commission. They are all probably worthy appointments individually, but a clear pattern is emerging, so will the Minister confirm that the main criteria now for senior public appointments is that someone has to be a former Tory MP or Cabinet Minister?

Oliver Dowden: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a rhetorical flourish. Sadly, the facts just do not bear it out. The Government’s code for public appointments is clear that political activity is neither a judgment of merit nor a bar to becoming a political appointee. If he looks at the statistics, he will see that of 1,000 candidates in the past year—2016-17—4.9% were Conservative and 4.8% were Labour.

Vicky Foxcroft: I think a fair interpretation is that it was a rhetorical question, which is not entirely without precedent in the history of the House of Commons.

National Democracy Week


The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): National Democracy Week begins on Monday and events will take place across the United Kingdom, encouraging everyone to get involved in our democracy. I thank those partners who are helping particularly to make sure that we reach under-registered groups. I hope that Members across the House will support it.

Luke Graham: National Democracy Week is about encouraging people to be active British citizens. What steps have been taken to extend the National Citizen Service to Scotland, so that my constituents can have the same opportunities as others throughout the United Kingdom?

Chloe Smith: I welcome my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for National Democracy Week and for the National Citizen Service. Funding is available for the devolved Administrations to deliver the NCS, although the decision is a matter for them. As a proud Unionist like him, I would like to see young people across the United Kingdom benefiting from it.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am just wondering how the Government can, with a straight face, celebrate something called National Democracy Week when they are completely undermining democracy in this country by passing laws without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, ripping up the Sewel convention and fundamentally undermining devolution.

Chloe Smith: There was not a question in that, but none the less, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. This Government believe fundamentally in the treatment of businesses and citizens.

Mr Speaker: I think a fair interpretation is that it was a rhetorical question, which is not entirely without precedent in the history of the House of Commons.

Voter ID Pilots

9. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What representations he has received on the legality of the voter ID pilots.

12. Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What representations he has received on the legality of the voter ID pilots.
14. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What representations he has received on the legality of the voter ID pilots.

[906099]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): My Department has not received any representations about the legality of the pilots. The powers to make the pilot scheme orders are in section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000, which was, of course, passed by Parliament. Those powers enable changes to be made to rules regarding the conduct of any local elections in England and Wales.

**Mr Sweeney:** At the last general election, my constituency had the lowest turnout in the UK, and it also has a low registration rate. What kind of democracy are we living in when the Government actively pursue a scheme that results in people being denied the vote, as was shown by the pilot in May, instead of seeking better engagement and participation in our democracy by potential voters?

**Chloe Smith:** The hon. Gentleman will have just heard me setting out measures to encourage more people to be involved in our democracy. He knows, as I hope does every Opposition Member, that there is a point of principle at stake here. Do we defend our system from fraud or do we not?

**Laura Smith:** Two barristers have concluded that there is no provision in the Representation of the People Act to introduce schemes by secondary legislation that restrict or discourage voting, and that the scheme is therefore beyond the scope of the law. Can the Minister reassure the House that she acted within the law?

**Chloe Smith:** Yes, I can. I can also reassure those listening that this is clearly a series of Labour Whips’ handout questions.

**Laura Smith** indicated dissent.

**Chloe Smith:** The Labour party might like to reflect on the fact that it was its 2000 Act that allowed the pilots to be run.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) is signalling that that was very much her own question. It has to be said that Whips’ handouts have been discouraged from voting. Is this not a slap in the face of people who are working hard to encourage people to vote?

**Chloe Smith:** To be clear, that was 340 out of a total of more than 230,000. I also want to be clear on the matter of principle. The Labour party accepts this principle for its own selection meetings, where it routinely asks for ID from members. Is this good enough for Labour but not for the rest of the country?

**Topical Questions**

T1. [906100] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): 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): The private sector has a vital role to play in delivering public services and is something that this Government will continue to champion. Earlier this week, I announced new measures in the wake of the collapse of Carillion to promote and deepen responsible capitalism, whereby everyone plays by the same rules and businesses recognise their duties and obligations to wider society. That is in line with the Government’s commitment to deliver an economy that works for everyone.

**Mr Hepburn:** As Carillion showed, the outsourcing of Government contracts is nothing but a gamble with jobs and public money. When will the Tories put the public interest first instead of their friends, spivs and speculators?

**Mr Lidington:** The collapse of Carillion has shown that outsourcing genuinely transfers risk from taxpayers to shareholders, directors and lenders—to the private sector company.

T2. [906101] **Johnny Mercer** (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What work has the Cabinet Office done to ensure that Departments have the skills and people required to deliver a successful exit from the European Union?

**The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis):** My hon. Friend is right to ask that question. We are focused on ensuring that we deliver a successful and positive exit from the European Union. The Cabinet Office works closely with colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union and other Departments to ensure that all those places are professionally filled. I can confirm that, as of the end of March 2018, some 5,500 staff have been recruited to the Departments most affected.

T6. [906105] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Further to the question about outsourcing, can the Minister—

**Mr Speaker:** We empathise with the hon. Gentleman. It is okay; maybe some lozenge will be provided, or some water. Please, let us hear the question.

**Mr Cunningham:** Can the Minister give us some examples?

**Mr Speaker:** Was that heard? I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but I think we may have to ask someone else to ask his question for him.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Can the Minister give us some examples?

**Mr Speaker:** We are grateful to the hon. Lady, and we wish the hon. Gentleman well.
Mr Lidington: I take that as the hon. Gentleman, through the hon. Lady, was asking for examples of successful outsourcing. I refer him to the outsourcing of the teachers’ pension scheme, which has cut administrative costs by nearly half, to the benefit of pension scheme members.

T3. [906102] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress has my hon. Friend made in allowing the Jain community to declare their religion in the new census, and will she agree to meet a delegation from the community?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Yes, and I look forward to that meeting. Since the response to consultation on the matter in May 2016, the Office for National Statistics has continued to consult stakeholders, and has met the members of the all-party group on Jainism. It is considering all the evidence provided, and will finalise its recommendations shortly.

T7. [906106] Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Will the Minister please explain how the Government justify wasting time and taxpayers’ money on the “testing and scrutiny” of contractual arrangements, only to ignore their own highest possible risk rating for Capita and award it the fire and rescue contract?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Cabinet Office has extensive functions to ensure that we award contracts only to companies that offer the very best value, and that was exactly the case in that instance.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What recent discussions has my hon. Friend had with Cabinet colleagues about the cost to the taxpayer of public sector workers’ taking trade union facility time?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For too long, unions in the public sector have received taxpayer funding for an activity that is inadequately controlled and poor value for money, which is why we are introducing transparency in respect of facility time. We believe that proper management could save our taxpayers up to £100 million.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The anniversary of the Prime Minister’s announcement of a public inquiry into contaminated blood is fast approaching. Can we expect a statement in the House to say that the terms of reference have finally been agreed and the public inquiry can get on with its work?

Mr Lidington: I am acutely aware of that anniversary date, and the justifiable expectations of survivors of that tragedy. I have sent the draft terms of reference proposed by the chair of the inquiry to the devolved Administrations, as I am obliged to do. I hope that I can announce the full details as rapidly as possible.

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes, a south-east London knight. Sir David Evennett.

T4. [906103] Sir David Evennett: What progress is the Department making in implementing the findings of the race disparity audit?

Mr Lidington: The Government have committed themselves to explaining or changing ethnic disparities highlighted by the audit. We have already announced action on criminal justice, employment support, school exclusions and youth unemployment, and we continue to talk to a range of stakeholders to take that work further.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that representatives of Wick High School were here last week—thank you for your kind remarks about them. Does the Minister agree that bringing schools the length and breadth of Britain, including my faraway constituency, to the House will do much for learning about democracy here in the mother of Parliaments?

Chloe Smith: Yes. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s constituents to this place. I hope that they will find things of interest to them during National Democracy Week, and that the resource packs that are available to all parliamentarians will enable them to make the most of it.
This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Helen Goodman: The Prime Minister is right: we all celebrate the huge contribution our armed forces and reserves make.

Last year the Prime Minister promised that no school would see a cut in its budget, yet half the schools in Bishop Auckland continue to face real cuts, some of more than £1,000 per child. Does she not understand the damage this does to children’s life chances?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, we are putting extra funding into schools. We are making extra money available for schools, and the fairer national funding formula that we have introduced is ensuring that some of the schools that have previously been among the worst funded in this country are seeing increases in their funding to help to redress the balance.

Q3. [906072] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): As a former Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, may I ask the Prime Minister whether, given the unresolved issues that remain in Northern Ireland, she has any plans to visit the Province in the near future?

The Prime Minister: We are considering a number of issues in relation to Northern Ireland at the moment, in the context of both Brexit and the devolved Administration. We hope that the Administration and the Assembly will get back up and running. I can say to my hon. Friend that I hope to visit Northern Ireland in the next few weeks.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Armed Forces Day and Reserves Day. I hope that we also recognise that we need to do far more to address veterans’ housing and health needs.

I also pay tribute to the firefighters tackling the blaze on Saddleworth moor. I am sure all our thoughts are with them, and their communities and families, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) is there today to support them.

On Brexit, the Business Secretary believes that business “is entitled to be listened to with respect.”—[Official Report, 25 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 609.] I am sorry to see that the Foreign Secretary is not with us today. He takes a very different view, using an Anglo-Saxon term to make his point. Which is the Prime Minister’s view?

The Prime Minister: This party and this Government have always backed business and we will continue to back business. And we back business because it is businesses that create millions of jobs for people in our country and provide billions of pounds in tax that we can spend on our public services; and because it is businesses that are the backbone of our prosperity. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that if he wants to start talking in favourable terms about business, he has a decision to make. He can either back business or he can want to overthrow capitalism; he cannot do both.

Jeremy Corbyn: I take the Prime Minister’s response as a thumbs-down to the Foreign Secretary.

In recent days, an unprecedented number of concerns have been raised by trade unions, business and even some Cabinet Ministers. Today the CBI director general said:

“Facts ignored today mean jobs lost tomorrow.”

Airbus supports 110,000 jobs in the UK supply chain, many of which are very highly skilled, well paid and unionised. The company says that no deal “would force Airbus to reconsider its footprint in the country, its investments” and its “dependency on the UK.”

Can the Prime Minister reassure thousands of workers today, and take the phoney threat of no deal off the negotiating table?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the question of Airbus. If he is so concerned about our aerospace and aviation industry, why did he not back the expansion of Heathrow in this Chamber?

Mr Speaker: [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Snell, calm yourself. Acquire the quality of an aspiring statesperson. Calm! The question has been asked, and the answer from the Prime Minister must, and will, be heard.

The Prime Minister: I do not normally agree with the secretary general of Unite, but on this occasion I actually do agree with him, because he says that backing the expansion—the third runway—at Heathrow would ensure that our country “remains a world leader in aviation and aerospace”.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, the Foreign Secretary did not back it either, but in his own way, he was helping the aviation industry: by spending 14 hours in a plane for a 10-minute meeting in Afghanistan.

The Government are not threatening the EU with their ridiculous position; they are threatening skilled jobs in this country. But at least one Government Minister understands this: the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). He has asked this question, which I think is about the Health and Foreign Secretaries:

“Do the leadership aspirations of multi-millionaires trump the need to listen to the employers and employees of this country?” Well, apparently they do. The head of BMW, which directly employs more than 8,000 workers—that is 8,000 jobs—in this country, has said that he needs to know the Government’s plans for customs. He says:

“If we don’t get clarity in the next couple of months we have to start making contingency plans”—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister was heard. No concerted attempt from either side of this House to shout a Member down will ever succeed. However long it takes, the Prime Minister will be heard and the Leader of the Opposition will be heard. Get the message.

Jeremy Corbyn: The noise of people hiding behind the Gallery is interesting. Mr Speaker, I am asking the Prime Minister how many more firms are telling her in private what Airbus and BMW are now saying very publicly.
The Prime Minister: We have been meeting with business and we are listening to business. That is why we are very clear on our customs arrangements that we want to ensure not just that we deliver on our commitment in Northern Ireland, with trade as frictionless as possible, but that we can trade around the rest of the world. If we are talking about Government plans for business, it is this Government who have brought the deficit down and it is this Government who are seeing employment at record levels. What would Labour’s three-point plan for business be? A 7% rise in corporation tax, nationalisation without compensation and a run on the pound. That is not backing business; it is a plan to break Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very interesting that even those Brexiteers who have made Brexit their life’s work are concerned about their own financial interests. The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), for example, is relocating his hedge fund to the eurozone, and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is advising his clients to disinvest in Britain. Meanwhile, in the real world, Andrew, who works for Honda in Swindon, wrote to me—[Laughter. I would not laugh if I were you. These are real people with real jobs and real concerns.

Andrew writes:

“I have seen nothing that gives me confidence that the government is going to deliver a trade agreement allowing the seamless flow of goods through Europe’s borders. My job along with many others in manufacturing, suppliers and the supply chain hang on this”. So will the Prime Minister ignore her Foreign Secretary, listen to workers, and secure an agreement that safeguards jobs in this country?

The Prime Minister: We are putting jobs at the heart of what we do in relation to Brexit. We are putting jobs at the heart of what we do as a Government through our modern industrial strategy and we are ensuring that, when we deliver Brexit, we deliver a Brexit that is good for our economy, good for jobs and good for people up and down this country.

Through most of his career, the right hon. Gentleman has been rather a Brexiteer himself. Why is it then that at every stage he and the Labour party are trying to frustrate Brexit in this House?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Labour party’s priority is defending jobs in this country. I doubt that Andrew from Swindon is alone among skilled workers when he goes on to say:

“I will hold the Prime Minister and her party culpable if my job and those of my colleagues at Honda end up being under threat.”

The Cabinet was split in two apparently on options for future customs arrangements with the EU. The Prime Minister’s preferred option was a customs partnership. We have had no official feedback on that working party, so did the Leader of the House speak for the Government when she said on Monday:

“I think the customs partnership looks quite bureaucratic and unwieldy”?

Is that option now ruled out as well?

The Prime Minister: As I have made clear on a number of occasions in the House, we are looking at both options in relation to customs because we want to ensure that we deliver as frictionless trade as possible with the European Union and the ability for us to negotiate trade deals around the rest of the world. That is what we should be looking for. It is what we are doing as a Government. The right hon. Gentleman says that the Labour party’s interest is in delivering jobs. Why is it then that every Labour Government leave office with more people out of work than when they went in?

Jeremy Corbyn: Coming from a Prime Minister who presides over an economy in which 1 million people are on zero-hours contracts, that is very rich. She rules out a customs union, the Leader of the House rules out the Prime Minister’s preferred option and reality rules out a maximum facilitation model. That leaves only no deal, which she refuses to rule out. She is putting jobs at risk. Sadly, it is not those of the warring egos in her Cabinet—they have now been rewarded with an invite to a pyjama party at Chequers. Meanwhile, thousands of skilled manufacturing jobs and the future of whole industries in Britain are at stake. The Prime Minister continues to promote the fallacy that no deal is better than a bad deal. No deal is a bad deal. Is not the truth that real jobs—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman. I will say it again: there is unlimited time—[Interruption.] Order. There is unlimited time as far as I am concerned. [Interruption.] Order. The questions will be heard and the answers will be heard, and nothing and no one will stop that happening. It is as simple and unmistakable and clear as that.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

No deal is a bad deal, but is not the truth that the real risk to jobs in our country is a Prime Minister who is having to negotiate round the clock with her own Cabinet to stop it falling apart rather than negotiating to defend the jobs of workers in this country?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what I and this Government are delivering. We are delivering a successor to Trident; stamp duty slashed for first-time buyers; a modern industrial strategy for jobs and growth; action on childhood obesity; 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools; fairer schools funding; new technical education; improved mental health services; expansion of Heathrow; record levels of employment—record levels of employment; falling borrowing; and rising real wages. We have triggered article 50, we have agreed an implementation period and we have passed the EU (Withdrawal) Bill: a Britain fit for the future and leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019.

Q5. [906074] Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Last weekend I attended celebrations marking 70 years of production of the great British Land Rover. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the workers of Solihull, commit to securing post-Brexit global trade deals and recognise that new clean diesel engines have a role to play for years to come?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I congratulate all the workers at British Land Rover on 70 years of production. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Leaving the European Union gives us an opportunity to be in a position to conduct our own trade policy and to sign our own trade agreements with countries around the world.
My hon. Friend raises a specific point about cleaner diesel engines, which can play an important part in reducing CO₂ emissions from road transport and could reduce CO₂ emissions further while meeting ever more stringent air quality standards during the transition to zero-emissions vehicles. This country is leading on the issue of zero-emissions vehicles, and Land Rover is playing its part.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I commend the armed forces and our reservists for the fine job they do for our country.

Airbus, Honda, BMW, the CBI, the TUC and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders—this Government have completely failed to listen to business, have insulted the business community and have left companies in the dark. Can the Prime Minister tell the House why 186,000 car manufacturing jobs are disposable to her?

The Prime Minister: We have been consistently listening to business throughout the negotiations so far. Business said it wants us to give priority to EU citizens’ rights here in the UK, and we did just that. Business said it wants an implementation period so there is not a cliff edge next March, and we have negotiated an implementation period so there will be a smooth and orderly Brexit. Business said it wants as frictionless trade as possible, so we are putting forward proposals to ensure we provide that frictionless trade with the European Union.

Alongside that, we will be developing a global Britain, looking out around the world and signing trade deals around the world. If the right hon. Gentleman thinks trade and business is so important, why did he not support Heathrow expansion?

Ian Blackford: Not for the first time, the Prime Minister has failed to answer the question, and the cost is that investment in Britain is being turned off by a Government who refuse to listen. More than a year ago, the Scottish Government presented a plan for the United Kingdom to remain in the single market and the customs union to give certainty to business. Just this week, Scotland’s First Minister took a trade delegation from Scotland to Berlin.

Every step of the way, the Scottish Government have been seeking to protect jobs and our economic interests. Two years on from the EU referendum, and with the clock ticking down, the Prime Minister has done nothing but increase uncertainty. Has she completed any economic analysis of jobs and the economy were the UK to stay in the single market and the customs union? If not, why not?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about investment into the United Kingdom. Last year, the United Kingdom remained the preferred country for foreign direct investment in Europe. Last year we saw 76,000 jobs being created as a result of foreign investment here in the United Kingdom, more than in the previous year.

If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about further confidence from business, he should just look at the fact that this month we have seen £2.3 billion of investment announced by the tech industry as part of London Tech Week, creating another 1,600 jobs, and I could give him more examples. If he wants to listen to business, he should listen to Scottish business, because its message is very clear: stay in the United Kingdom.

Q7. [906076] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Fresh from my success in managing to stagger over the line in the recent London marathon, I will be running a 10k road race as part of the Black country fun run in Halesowen this Sunday. The event has raised thousands of pounds for local charities in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister thank the organisers, particularly Alan Bowler and the Halesowen and Rowley Regis rotary club, for the work that they have put into the event, and will she offer her congratulations to those participating in the race on Sunday?

The Prime Minister: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend for completing the London marathon earlier this year and, I know, raising money for a very worthy local cause. I am happy to join him in wishing Alan Bowler, the Halesowen and Rowley Regis rotary club, and all those taking part in Sunday’s fun run the very best of luck. They are doing it for good causes and we congratulate them and wish them well.

Q2. [906071] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will know that we still have every nuclear submarine that the Royal Navy has ever had. There are 13 old nuclear submarines tied up in Devonport, seven in Rosyth, and little room for the ones that will come out of service soon. Further to our letter to her a fortnight ago, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who represents Rosyth, to discuss how we can extend civil nuclear decommissioning to those nuclear submarines, to ensure that we recycle them and create jobs in Plymouth, Scotland and west Cumbria?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of the safe storage and disposal of nuclear submarines very seriously indeed. There is capacity for safely storing all remaining operational Trafalgar-class submarines at Devonport following their decommissioning, and work has started on the dismantling of the first submarine, Swiftsure, with more than 50 tonnes of radioactive waste having been removed by the end of May. I believe that the hon. Gentleman and other Members have written to me about this issue; I will respond to him in further detail in due course and ask the relevant Minister to meet him to discuss the issue further.

Q8. [906077] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Last week, I met three students at the Spires College in Torquay who have been working on the Send My Friend to School campaign to make schools safe. Will the Prime Minister say what action the UK will be taking to ensure that the safe schools declaration makes a real difference to children who otherwise might not be able to access education?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. We know that conflict is a key driver of educational exclusion. Our education in emergencies work supports greater community awareness of how to protect children in education, by teaching
students and teachers about peacebuilding and strategies for conflict resolution. We view compliance with international humanitarian law as the primary basis to protect schools and educational facilities. We are also encouraging international partners to endorse the declaration, most recently Germany, which signed up last month. We take this issue very seriously and we are acting on that. We are supporting the United Nations' work and I am pleased to say that we are the largest single financial contributor to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

Q4. [906073] Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): West Wales and the valleys remains one of the poorest areas in western Europe, yet since 2015 we have seen the UK Government renge on manifesto promises to electrify the main line to Swansea and the north Wales line, and, more recently, on the development of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. Will the Prime Minister commit to ensuring that the mid-Wales growth deal does not suffer a similar fate? Or is it her Government's assessment that Wales is simply not worth the investment?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the mid-Wales growth deal. As he knows, I was happy to sign the Swansea city growth deal, the city deal for the Cardiff region, and one for northern Wales as well. I understand from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales that we are in discussions about the mid-Wales deal and will involve the hon. Gentleman in that.

Q9. [906078] Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend set out the Government's plans to improve educational provision for children with special educational needs, and will she congratulate Geraint Edwards, headteacher of the Priory School in Hitchin, on his brilliant and inspirational work in that regard?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate Geraint Edwards on the excellent work that he is doing as headteacher of the Priory School. We are committed to helping those children who have special educational needs to achieve well in their education, find employment and, obviously, lead happy and fulfilled lives, so we are implementing the biggest changes to the special educational needs and disabilities system in a generation, to improve these children's lives, and we are investing £391 million to support the reforms.

Q6. [906075] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Three weeks have passed since the Muslim Council of Britain wrote to the chair of the Conservative party to raise concerns about Islamophobia in the party and it has yet to receive a reply. He has also failed to respond to my letter of 16 June following reports of what looked like an attempt by Tory headquarters to cover up allegations against one of the Conservative party's vice-chairs, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley). Does the Prime Minister agree with Baroness Warsi and the Conservative Muslim Forum that the Conservative party is in denial about Islamophobia in its ranks?

The Prime Minister: Anti-Muslim discrimination is wrong. There is no place for it in our society. That is why, when I was Home Secretary, I required the police specifically to record anti-Muslim hate crime so that we could understand better what was happening and better tackle the issue. We have introduced a new code of conduct in the party. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), the chairman of the party, has met Tell MAMA. We investigate any allegations of Islamophobia that are made relating to members of the party. Action is taken and, in some cases, members have been suspended or expelled from the party as a result.

Q10. [906079] Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Recently, my right hon. Friend visited my constituency where she announced the Ayrshire growth deal. Does she agree that the deal has the potential to transform the local economy, and may I ask what steps the Government are taking to drive the matter forward?

The Prime Minister: I was very happy to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and to highlight the opportunities that the Ayrshire growth deal gives us. As I have said many times in this House before, that we are now reaching a point where the economic benefit that it can bring. Negotiations have now commenced between both Governments and the Ayrshire councils on how to implement the deal. I understand that officials met on Monday this week to discuss aerospace and proposals for Prestwick, and the work is ongoing across Ayrshire. Therefore, the work is continuing and I can assure him that we recognise the importance of the Ayrshire growth deal.

Q11. [906081] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the Foreign Secretary for expressing so pithily what her hard Brexit will do to British jobs and British businesses?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said many times in this House before, that we are pursuing a Brexit that will be a good deal for the United Kingdom, a good deal for business, a good deal for citizens, and a good deal for jobs. I believe that we will achieve that because it will be good not only for the United Kingdom, but for the European Union.

12. [906082] Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): After the tragedy of the Grenfell fire, may I put it to the Prime Minister that the people left being asked to pay for the costs of removing cladding and replacing it are the private leaseholders in private high-rise blocks? Can she try to make sure that the owners—the freeholders—have put to them the points well known to the all-party group and to the charity, Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, particularly Martin Boyd and Sebastian O’Kelly, that the situation is intolerable and needs to be solved properly?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will be aware of the action that we have taken as a Government in relation to the social sector and to local authorities, but we are calling on building owners in the private sector to follow the example set by the social sector in taking action to remove unsafe cladding. Some in the sector—I could name Barratt Developments, Legal & General and Taylor Wimpey—are doing the right thing and taking responsibility, but we want others to follow their
lead and we will continue to encourage them to do so. They must do the right thing, and if they do not, we are not ruling anything out at this stage.

Q13. [906083] Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Redford barracks has stood proudly for more than 100 years in Scotland’s capital city, yet this Government are threatening its closure with an adverse impact on both service personnel and the local community. My constituents have been waiting for months for an update on the better defence estate plan. It being Armed Forces Week, will the Prime Minister help me get an answer from the Secretary of State for Defence, and will she tell him that, rather than concentrating on his plans to replace her as Prime Minister, he should halt the destruction of the defence estate in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: A number of decisions are being made to ensure that we have the defence estate that is right for our future capabilities and requirements. I will ensure that the hon. and learned Lady’s point about not yet receiving a reply from the Secretary of State is brought to the attention of the Ministry of Defence.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): We all need to keep our election pledges, whether we made those pledges one year ago or nine years ago, so will the Prime Minister update us on our Conservative manifesto election pledges to leave the single market, leave the customs union and pursue an independent trade policy?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the service that he has given to the Government over the past seven years, most recently in an important role on the very topic that he has just raised—as Minister of State at the Department for International Trade—and also in his time as Minister for London. He conducted all these jobs with great ability and distinction, and I thank him for all the work that he has done.

My right hon. Friend is right that we want to ensure that we can negotiate independent trade deals around the rest of the world. We will be leaving the single market and the customs union so that we can do exactly that—have an independent trade policy and negotiate our own trade deals with the rest of the world.

Q14. [906084] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Almost two weeks after the significant fire at Glasgow School of Art and the O2 ABC, neighbouring constituents and businesses are still out of their properties. Many are struggling to get their insurance companies to provide adequate support as their own properties have not been damaged. Will the Prime Minister do all in her power to push insurance companies to provide the maximum support possible to my constituents and businesses?

The Prime Minister: This was a terrible fire, damaging one of Glasgow’s iconic landmarks, which was rightly regarded as a building of great architectural significance.

Alison Thewliss: What about constituents?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am coming to the issue that the hon. Lady has raised. Lady has raised. I just wanted to take this opportunity to give my heartfelt thanks to the work of the emergency services, which did their best in addressing the fire. The hon. Lady has raised a specific issue about insurance and ensuring that others can return to their buildings that are close by. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Scotland is aware of that question, and we will look at what can be done.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): At 6.49 am my constituent, James Wheatcroft, emailed me to say: “I am currently standing at Shepreth station. 06.40 has just arrived. 05.38, 06.10 and 07.25 bus cancelled so this is on the ONLY train to London this morning until the 8.10... Five people have been on the platform for over an hour and...miss their Eurostar connection the station car park is totally empty—people giving up and working from home.”

At 7.29 am he sent another message: “Our train has now broken down...Another train has arrived but there is not enough room for everyone.”

At 7.59 am, he said that the rest of the passengers had to get a train back north, there was no room for them on that either and that “people simply decided to go home.”

Please, Prime Minister—assurances from GBR Thameslink Railway are not enough. We need a taskforce to micro-manage these contracts back to performance. Will she please commit to that?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend. The performance provided for passengers has been unacceptable. The Department for Transport has been working on this issue with GTR, and it is working to provide a new timetable, which will provide more capacity on the services, but it is not the same timetable that was originally introduced in May. The Department for Transport will continue to work to ensure that the rail company is providing the performance that passengers rightly expect and deserve.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): On Saturday, around 100,000 people gathered in Parliament Square to demand a people’s vote on the final Brexit deal. I did not see the Prime Minister among the many Conservatives in the crowd, and the Leader of the Opposition was in the middle east avoiding the many Labour supporters. Since the Prime Minister—[Interruption.] Since the Prime Minister has such confidence that she will produce a good Brexit deal, why is she so afraid of allowing the final say to the public to endorse it?

The Prime Minister: The Liberal Democrats have argued in the past that we should have a referendum to give people the choice about whether to stay in the European Union. We gave the people a choice, they have voted and we will deliver on it.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm to the House today that she is absolutely committed to this country retaining its tier 1 military status, and equally open to the idea that increased threats require increased resources, but also committed to reforming the Department so that we end the narrative of constant decline of UK military capability when the truth is in fact the complete reverse?

The Prime Minister: We are absolutely committed to this country remaining a leading military power. There is no question but that the Government will do what they need to do to ensure that we are a leading military power, but we need to ensure that we look at the threats
that we are now facing and the capabilities we need as these threats change. That is what the modernising defence programme is about. My hon. Friend makes the important point that this is also about making sure that our Ministry of Defence is operating as cost-effectively as it can so that we ensure that we are providing for the brave men and women in our armed forces, but also addressing the needs of the future. What do we need the Ministry of Defence and our armed forces to look like in 2030? That is the question, but we are committed to remaining a leading military power.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On Saturday, I was at BMW Cowley with 15,000 people, all of them BMW workers and their families. Just two days later, we had the starkest warning yet from BMW about the damage of a chaotic deal on Brexit for customs processes. When will the Prime Minister’s Government ditch the ideology and in-fighting and prioritise reaching a workable deal on customs?

The Prime Minister: We are doing exactly that. We are putting forward proposals—[Interruption.] We are putting forward proposals to ensure that we can have as frictionless a trade with the European Union as possible. That is the aim of this Government, that is what we are working on, and that is what I am sure we will deliver on.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Across the country, people are taking great pride in the disciplined performance of Gareth Southgate’s young and diverse team. Will my right hon. Friend signal her Government’s support for their campaign during the play-offs by asking public buildings across England to fly the St George’s cross, alongside the Union Jack if they want? Will she also offer special help to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) in raising her own St George’s cross to support our World Cup campaign?

The Prime Minister: On the issue of flying flags, as I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate, we are flying the armed forces flag at No. 10 this week, but I do want to join him in congratulating the England team on making it through to the next round in the World Cup. I can assure him that No. 10 will be flying the England flag on the day of each of England’s matches from now on, and we will be encouraging other Government Departments to do the same. I can also say that I am going to go further than my predecessors: next year we will do the same for the women’s World Cup.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Social care workers up and down the country are being paid less than the minimum wage as a result of incorrect Government guidance. We are repeatedly told that the Government are in talks with the EU to resolve this issue. Why are the talks taking so long? Will the Prime Minister do the right thing and commit to paying the workers what they are owed, directly through an HMRC scheme?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an issue about people being paid the minimum wage. Obviously, there are rules in place to ensure that exactly that happens.

Laura Smith: It is not happening.

The Prime Minister: We are aware of the issue that the hon. Lady has raised. There have been discussions taking place in relation to that. We have been working to ensure that this matter can be dealt with not just in the interests, obviously, of those who are working in the social care sector but also in having a care for the impact that it will have on the charities that are working in that sector.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): In matters relating to my constituency, education, defence and local government are all in need of more funding. Can the Prime Minister assure me that the very welcome allocation of more money to the NHS does not crowd everything else out?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to stand up and speak on behalf of his constituents and their interests, as other Members of the House do. As I made clear when I made the announcement about the NHS funding, other Departments’ budgets will all be considered in the spending review.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Everyone knows that Black country brewers brew the best beer in Britain. Holden’s in Dudley has been bottling beer continuously for 75 years, even through the war, but along with other producers, it has had to cease production this week because of the European CO2 shortage. What are the Government doing to sort that out, so that we can all enjoy a beer during the World cup?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that that is predominantly a commercial matter for the companies affected—the producers and suppliers. I am aware of the reports of shortages across Europe, and I know that industry is working on the solution. Although it is an issue for industry, the Government are in regular contact with the UK producer, distribution and consumer companies and trade associations, including those in the food and drink sector. He has made his point well, and I am sure that all those involved are working hard to ensure that his aim can be achieved.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): This morning the Supreme Court ruled that the Government had created inequality in not extending civil partnerships to everyone when they passed the equal marriage legislation back in 2013, and that discrimination needs to be addressed urgently. Will the Prime Minister now support an amendment to my Civil Partnerships Bill when it goes into Committee next month, as the quickest way to resolve this illegal inequality and extend civil partnerships to everyone?

The Prime Minister: We are very well aware of our legal obligations, and we will obviously need to consider the judgment of the Supreme Court with great care. We also recognise the sensitive and personal issues that are involved in this case, and we acknowledge the genuine convictions of the couple involved. My hon. Friend refers to his private Member’s Bill. As he will know, we have committed to undertake a full review of the operation of civil partnerships. I know that there has been a lot of
discussion with him about his Bill. We are supporting his private Member’s Bill, which would enshrine that commitment in law.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Over 100 firefighters are tackling fires across Saddleworth moors, spread over 7 square miles in my constituency and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). Will the Prime Minister join me in commending members of the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service and Greater Manchester police and the many others who have volunteered and contributed to bringing the fires under control? Will she commit to allocate contingency funds to those authorities affected, in recognition of the huge impact of this major incident on their resources?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the sympathies of Members across the whole House are with everyone affected by the fire, and I join the hon. Lady in commending the emergency services and all the volunteers and others who have been working to deal with the fire and fight it. I can reassure her that the Home Office is monitoring the situation closely with the National Resilience Assurance Team. So far, no request for Government support has been made by the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service, but we are keeping this under constant review, and operational policy arrangements are in place to provide support if required.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): All Rolls-Royce motorcars—an iconic global brand—are made in my constituency. Every day, 150 trucks arrive from Europe to supply BMW plants, and 120 trucks leave the UK headed for Europe. We are the only serious party of business, so can the Prime Minister give some certainty and confidence to the largest employer in my constituency and businesses up and down the country that they can continue their seamless operating model as we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue. Obviously Rolls-Royce plays a very important role in her constituency, but also in our country. It is an iconic brand for our country. We want to have the greatest possible tariff-free and frictionless trade with the European Union. That is what we are working on. At the same time, we want to ensure that we can negotiate other trade deals around the rest of the world. We want UK companies to have the maximum freedom to be able to continue to trade with and operate within European markets, while letting European businesses do the same here in the UK, but we also want to encourage our excellent, iconic businesses to have better opportunities to trade around the rest of the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Dr Paul Williams.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Two Select Committees—the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee—have today released a joint report describing a vision of a social care system where quality personal care is delivered free at the point of need, separated from the ability to pay, and how to achieve that vision. The Committees’ citizens jury said this was a system they were prepared to pay for. Does the Prime Minister share that vision?

The Prime Minister: We will obviously look very carefully at reports that have been produced by Select Committees of the House. We are committed to producing a social care Green Paper in the autumn.
Points of Order

12.50 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to the hon. Gentleman when there is an appropriate air of hush, anticipation and respect for the hon. Gentleman—to which we are gradually approximating. [Interruption.] I know the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) used to be a teacher, but she does not have to raise her hand in the Chamber, as though she was asking a question. We will come to the hon. Lady and her point of order in due course. First, I hope the House will be quiet as we hear the point of order from Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for taking my point of order earlier than normal. The right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition referred to me in his comments earlier. He has only been a Member of the House for 35 years, so he may not have learned the form—it is considered good form for a Member to tell another Member in advance when they are going to refer to them—but that is not the point. What the right hon. Gentleman said was false in all respects. My company does not actually run any hedge funds, so to have moved a hedge fund out of this country would have shown a remarkable acrobatic nature within the business; we have not in fact done so. I wondered whether he might like to take this opportunity, as he is still in the Chamber, to set the record straight, rather than otherwise be a peddler of false news or perhaps guilty of terminological inexactitude.

Mr Speaker: Ah, I know that terminological inexactitude is of unfailling interest to the hon. Gentleman, who appreciates the historical significance of the term that he has just used. It is perfectly open to the Leader of the Opposition to come to the Dispatch Box if he wishes to do so. [Interruption.] Order. All this hand waving is rather unseemly. However, the right hon. Gentleman is not under any obligation to do so. The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has made his point, and it is on the record. I thank him for making it, and we will leave it there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: If there are other points of order, I will exceptionally take them now, before we proceed to the urgent question.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to ask your advice on a matter of exceptional importance to my constituents. As you know, I have been seeking for quite some time now to get a simple, clear answer to what I believe to be a simple, clear question. I have written to Ministers, put in written questions and asked questions during oral questions, and so far I have been unable to get a straightforward answer to this question: when will this Government release the money for the child and adolescent mental health services unit in my constituency that they have long promised? In fact, to the last written question I put in, I received what can only be described as the slightly offensive reply that “details of ministerial discussions are not disclosed.” They have not even had the decency to give me some kind of timeframe. How can I get the Department of Health and Social Care to tell me when it will release the money for the CAMHS unit that is so desperately needed in my constituency?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for giving me notice that she wished to raise it. I can understand her frustration at the responses she has received from the Treasury. I believe that the practice of Departments in responding to questions about ministerial discussions varies somewhat. I would be most concerned if Departments were not giving equal treatment to questions from Members on both sides of the House. This point will be heard—if not immediately, then in due course—by the Leader of the House, who is the custodian of the rights of all Members, or one of the important custodians of the rights of all Members.

The hon. Lady may wish to raise her concerns with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), as his Committee keeps a watchful eye on Departments’ patterns of answering parliamentary questions. Meanwhile—I know this is frustrating and irritating for her—I encourage her to persist in questioning. My almost failsafe advice to a Member seeking guidance about how to proceed in relation to some unresolved matter is: persist, persist, persist! There are many examples of Members on both sides of the House who have specialised in such an approach. I feel sure that the hon. Lady will not mind my praying in aid the late and, to many, great Sir Gerald Kaufman, who was not to be dissuaded from the pursuit of what he thought was proper by non-answers, delay or procrastination. That right hon. Gentleman simply went on and on and on until he secured the satisfaction that he sought, and I commend such an approach to the hon. Lady.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Lady, but first I call Mr Richard Drax.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the Leader of the Opposition leaves the House, may I raise the point already raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)? You, Mr Speaker, are very much against our using the word “lie” in the House, and I understand why, but what about “misleading”, because there is no doubt that the Leader of the Opposition has misled the House and the country? Normally, it is the tradition for a Member to apologise if they mislead the House. I seek your advice on this urgent matter, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is an important matter, but I have the benefit of the Clerk, who has instantly consulted his scholarly cranium, having swivelled round and advised me, “No”. The reason why I say no to the hon. Gentleman—I accept that the point is serious—is that to say that the Leader of the Opposition has misled the House and committed an offence is to accuse him of
having deliberately misled the House. There is no suggestion of that, even from the hon. Member for North East Somerset.

Although I completely understand both the support of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for his colleague and his genuine concern about this matter—he is himself unfailingly polite at all times—it is not for the Chair to seek to arbitrate in such a matter about whether a parliamentary error has been committed. Each Member of this House, whoever that Member is and whatever post he or she occupies, is responsible for words uttered in this Chamber and, as appropriate, for the correction of them; I am not the umpire of whether he or she is required to make a correction. That is not just a doctrine evolved on the spot, but the very long established practice of this House. The hon. Gentleman has made his point and it is on the record, and it may even wing its way to the people of his Dorset constituency.

Catherine West: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is my first point of order in three years, so I am actually quite excited.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As are we all.

Catherine West: It is about a serious matter, however. At Prime Minister’s questions on 14 March, the Prime Minister instructed the Home Secretary to meet me to discuss the epidemic of gun crime in Haringey. A further meeting with a junior Home Office Minister was promised in connection with the totally separate case, involving mistaken identity, of an anti-terror raid in my constituency in April. It has now been 15 weeks since the first promise was made, and neither of these meetings has materialised. Mr Speaker, teenagers are dying in my constituency from knives and guns, and I urgently seek your advice about whether there are any parliamentary mechanisms by which I can ensure that the Government fulfil the promises made to meet me on behalf of those constituents.

Mr Speaker: My instant response to the hon. Lady is to mention to her—she will be aware of this fact, but it may not be known to people observing our proceedings—that an important Bill, the Offensive Weapons Bill, is about to be debated on Second Reading. If I may politely say so, that would be a convenient opportunity again to flag up her discontent on the matter. I thank her for giving me notice of this point of order, and I would say, more widely, that I entirely understand her—and, in her position, I would feel—great annoyance that it seems to be taking an inordinately long time to arrange a meeting with Home Office Ministers to discuss these very serious matters, and specifically to honour, as I understand from what she has said, a commitment to her. The concern will have been noted by those on the Treasury Bench, and I hope that a meeting will be swiftly arranged. It would be unfortunate—not just in terms of inconvenience to the hon. Lady, but of embarrassment to the occupants of the Treasury Bench—if it were necessary for her to raise this matter in the Chamber on a subsequent day, so I hope that help will be at hand sooner rather than later.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Perhaps surprisingly, the Prime Minister did not choose to tell the House during Prime Minister’s Question Time about the resignation this morning of the Leader of the Welsh Conservative party over remarks he made about Brexit and business. This was despite their being indistinguishable from the remarks made by the Foreign Secretary, apart from the swearing. Is there any means by which this matter could be put on the record?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, who is a very experienced and dextrous Member of this House, has found his own salvation. Furthermore, he has not just stumbled into finding it; he knows that by the utterly bogus device of a contrived point of order he has achieved his objective, as his demonstration of amusement evidently testifies.
Privately Financed Prisons

1.1 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Justice Secretary to make a statement on the Government’s plans for more privately financed prisons.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Yesterday, I attended the Justice Committee hearing on prison populations and confirmed that, in line with the 2016 White Paper and the 2017 manifesto, we remain committed to delivering 10,000 new prison places in order to replace the places in prisons that at the moment often have old, unsuitable and expensive accommodation.

During the Committee testimony, I confirmed two things. The first was that we will be proceeding at Wellingborough with a public capital financed prison, with work to begin at the end of this year or the beginning of next, subject to the usual tests of affordability and planning. I also confirmed that at the Glen Parva site we will be continuing with the current demolition and proceeding, again subject to the normal tests of affordability and planning, to a competition for a private finance initiative construction of the Glen Parva prison. We will then continue to push ahead with the four subsequent prisons, bringing us to the total of 10,000 places.

We are also investing £16 million in further investments in repairs in the existing estate. All of this is absolutely essential because, as the shadow Lord Chancellor is very aware, much of our estate remains old, expensive and unsuitable for prisoners, and we must move to regenerate it.

Richard Burgon: Yesterday, the prisons Minister announced a new private prison at Glen Parva. Previously, the Government had announced a £1.3 billion plan to build 10,000 new prison places. Despite repeated questioning from Labour, the Government had provided only obfuscation as to how these places would be paid for—now we know why. I hope that my list of questions will finally be answered today.

The Ministry of Justice has been cut more than any other Department—it has been cut by 40%, or £4 billion per year. The flipside of cuts is a greater dependence on privatisation and outsourcing, and when it comes to our prisons it is the public who pay the price. Carillion’s collapse affected half the prison estate, where it was contracted to do basic prison maintenance. Yesterday, the prisons Minister revealed that the contract was “completely unsustainable”, costing the public millions of pounds more each year, yet now we have more private contracts on the way. There are therefore questions to answer.

How many other new prisons are the Government considering building under PFI? What is the estimated additional cost to the public ministry of building prisons under PFI? Will the new prisons have their maintenance work outsourced? Does the Minister still definitely intend to sell off Victorian prisons that do nothing to reduce reoffending? If not, does that mean less income and more privatisation in our prisons estate? Will he allow any of the companies being investigated by the Serious Fraud Office for overcharging the MOJ—Serco and G4S—to bid to run the new prisons? Will the new residential women’s centre announced by the Government today be financed by the private sector? Finally, will the new Justice Minister, who once worked in a senior role at Serco, which has £3.6 billion worth of MOJ contracts, be involved in the tendering process for any more of these private prisons?

Rory Stewart: The shadow Lord Chancellor asked a number of important questions. Let me go through the answer on the six prisons where the 10,000 places are. At the first prison, Wellingborough, the construction will be funded by public capital. The second prison, Glen Parva, will be funded through PFI. We are exploring a range of other funding arrangements, including private finance, for the remaining four prisons but we have yet to achieve a resolution on that.

On the question of who we would like to bid, of course we will be looking for legal, reliable bidders, but I wish to emphasise that the key here is about getting quality and diversity into the estate. We do not want to be overly ideological about this. We believe in a mixed estate. There are some excellent public sector prisons. I had the privilege of visiting Dartmoor prison recently, where prison officers within the public sector estate are delivering excellent services and getting very good inspection reports. At the same time, Serco is running a difficult, challenging prison at Thameside, which has 1,600 places, and is innovating. It is bringing in new technology; it is bringing computers into cells and it has had a real impact on violence and on drugs.

At Liverpool’s Altcourse prison, G4S is running a prison where there are fantastic employment facilities and workshops in operation. The inspectors have clarified that in Liverpool the private sector, drawing on the same population size, is outperforming the public sector. This is not a question of a binary choice between the private and the public sectors; it is a question of a diversity of suppliers, who can often learn a great deal from each other.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the question of whether a prison is publicly or privately financed and operated is an ideological irrelevance to the very many problems he faces? While accepting my congratulations on all the announcements he and the Secretary of State have made this morning, will he confirm that he will continue to give priority to reducing the numbers in prison, where possible, by removing those who are merely inadequate, those who are mentally ill and who could benefit from rehabilitation elsewhere? Will he also ensure that he gets rid of the older, slum, overcrowded prisons and that the new prisons can provide the quality of security and rehabilitation that the public deserve?

Rory Stewart: That question comes from someone who was of course a very distinguished Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. My right hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point: we need to ensure that prison is there primarily for the purposes of punishment, the protection of the public and turning around lives in order to prevent reoffending. We have to be absolutely clear that people who ought to be in prison must be in prison and properly housed there, and we must work to turn their lives around. He has put his
finger on the fact that we have inherited a very challenging estate. Almost a quarter of our prisons are buildings that stretch back to the Victorian era or, in some cases, to the late 18th century. That causes unbelievable problems of maintenance, and it contributes to problems of overcrowding and to issues of decency. All of that gets in the way of our ability to provide the conditions that allow us to turn around prisoners’ lives. Therefore, it unfortunately gets in the way of preventing reoffending, which, ultimately, is the best way of protecting the public.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In the same week that the east coast line trains began running under public ownership, following the third failure in 10 years of the privatised model, we now have the Tories moving to privatisate yet more of the Prison Service. We know it was the then Justice Secretary—he is now Transport Secretary—who awarded Carillion the £200 million outsourcing contract for prison maintenance. What due diligence did he complete on Carillion before signing off on that? Why was it allowed to underbid for the contract by £15 million? The prisons Minister said that the Carillion deal was “completely unsustainable” and a “real, real lesson” for the MOJ, so why does he think that yet more privatisation is the solution?

Lastly, the MOJ confirmed in a written answer on 21 June that the Government hold contracts worth £3.6 billion with the private firm Serco, despite the firm having been the subject of an investigation by the Serious Fraud Office. Does he honestly think that will reassure the public that we are not heading for a repeat of what happened with Carillion?

Rory Stewart: To some extent, we are going over old ground again. The key, I believe, is to focus on the results on the ground. Let us start with the hon. Gentleman’s final question. We should really be judging Serco’s, Sodexo’s and G4S’s performance in prisons by what they are currently doing in prisons. Nearly 25 years of experience now lie behind this. We have a highly experienced Department. There are 14 privately run prisons with very clear key performance indicators. The inspection reports on those prisons are strong—some are among the cleanest and best run in the country, with very good scores from the inspectors on decency, purposeful activity and resettlement.

To clarify on the issue of Carillion, yes, the company was losing approximately £15 million a year on that contract, but the taxpayer was not losing that money. Carillion was bearing the cost. The taxpayer was effectively saving £15 million a year on that contract. At the same time, I agree that we need to take a lesson from what happened, look carefully at the financial viability of these companies and look at their performance in prisons.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend’s statement, as I did everything that he said about the Government’s approach to prisons at the Justice Committee yesterday. Does he agree that anyone who takes an interest and has regularly visited prisons will be aware that the successes and failures within the prison estate have nothing to do with ownership? He has cited two examples of excellent private sector provision; as a south-east London MP, I am well aware of Thameside myself. Does he agree that what we really need to do across the House is make the case that prison reform is in the interests of society and victims, rather than going down ideological side tracks?

Rory Stewart: I think that is something we share across the Benches. Both sides of the House share a common desire: to reduce crime and reoffending, and turn around people’s lives. It is a terrible waste that nearly 40% of our prison population have been in care, that nearly 50% have been excluded from school, and that the literacy level of nearly 50% is lower than that of an 11-year-old. The rates of reoffending have been stubbornly high for 40 or 50 years.

We need to work together to crack these problems. Decent, clean, well run and well managed prisons are part of the key. Another part is getting cross-party consensus on the difficult and brave political choices required to begin to reduce the prison population and protect the public through a reduction in reoffending.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Yesterday, the Minister confirmed that the Carillion contract for facilities had not been managed well by his Department and had resulted in additional costs to Carillion. What guarantees can he give the House that the contract for the new prison will be managed in an effective way? Will he ensure that the contract is published and subject to freedom of information, so that we can scrutinise his decisions?

Rory Stewart: The right hon. Gentleman has enormous experience of the issue, having been the prisons Minister responsible for managing private prisons. He is therefore aware that one reason we can stand up in front of the House and say we are confident we can do this is that we have been doing it for 25 years.

Some 14 private sector prisons are operating, with good reports from the inspectors. We have a lot of experience of how this is done. This is not a new area of Government activity; the right hon. Gentleman himself managed exactly these prisons. The key is balancing proper competition, which brings in diversity and innovation, with the right key performance indicators to make sure that we stay on top of that performance.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Unsurprisingly, I add my congratulations to the Minister to those of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke): I absolutely endorse his non-ideological approach. In considering what he will put in place in future, will he look carefully at prison maintenance contracts? I think it would be better if the prisons themselves had greater control over such contracts, rather than there being one contract let centrally to maintain very many prisons.

Rory Stewart: Getting the balance right on maintenance will be central. We are talking about three different kinds of maintenance: big structural maintenance, the daily replacement of fittings and so on, and the basic cleaning and facilities management. We need new approaches to all three, but in relation to the last, I pay tribute to the governor of Leeds prison, who is showing that prisoners, by focusing on such things, can get qualifications themselves, improve living conditions for prisoners and prison officers, and take those skills back into the wider community to find employment.
Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In the spirit of developing a cross-party consensus on prisons, I welcome the Government’s apparent conversion yesterday to the Liberal Democrat policy of axing the vast majority of prison sentences of under a year. When will the policy be implemented? Has the prison building plan that the Minister announced yesterday to the Justice Committee factored in such a policy change?

Rory Stewart: The argument that I was making yesterday is that the recent evidence from our Department shows very clearly that people sentenced to short prison terms are more likely to reoffend than somebody with a community sentence—in other words, they pose a greater threat to the public at the moment of release. They also pose a destabilising factor in prisons: they are disproportionately connected to drugs and violence.

At the same time, as has been pointed out, we have an obligation to protect the public and be careful about who exactly we are talking about within this category. An enormous amount more discussion needs to take place. I would be very happy to sit down with the right hon. Gentleman to discuss ideas. This is not an easy one to resolve, but the data is driving us in a particular direction.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): When it comes to fixing our prisons, what matters is what works. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than there being some public/private split in what are, let us say, the more antique wings, does he agree that rather than there being some public/private ideology, we should focus on prisons that are well built and managed, on making sure that our staff and seeing at first hand the challenges of running the prison in what are, let us say, the more antique wings.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. We are very much open to both types of ownership. While praising some of the performance of private sector prisons, I take this opportunity to reiterate that prison officers in public sector prisons are astonishing individuals. On Thursday, I was lucky enough to attend the prison officers’ annual awards, where we heard extraordinary stories about their work, courage, resilience and dedication on long shifts in some of the most challenging environments in this country. They need real tribute. Our public sector prisons are wonderful examples of public service.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister speaks of the prison population who have been in care, and I know he is well aware of the high proportion of women in the prison system who have been abused in other relationships and settings, but Baroness Corston pointed all that out 11 years ago, which led to the Labour Government setting up what were often called “Corston projects”, such as Eden House in Bristol East, which has suffered, I am afraid, from cuts under successive Tory Governments since 2010. It is a bit rich to hear this morning an announcement that coming up with residential alternatives to custody is a new idea.

In addition to what the Minister has said this morning, will he please update us on how facilities for women in the criminal justice system but outside prison are going to be brought back up to scratch, as Baroness Corston intended?

Rory Stewart: The Secretary of State and Lord Chancellor met Baroness Corston yesterday and they had a constructive conversation in which they welcomed each other’s points. I absolutely accept the hon. Lady’s basic point—that it often feels as if there is nothing radically new in criminal justice. I have just been looking at reports from 1962 on HMP Albany in the Isle of Wight and saw a lot of echoes with what, unfortunately, is still going on in many places today. That is because prisons for offenders are very difficult.

The hon. Lady is also absolutely right that nearly 65% of women in custody have experienced some form of domestic abuse. That is why we are very proud, whatever the cross-party discussions, that we are pressing ahead with the female offenders strategy today. The Lord Chancellor is leading on this, along with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), the Minister responsible for the female estate.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Minister for visiting Chelmsford prison with me a fortnight ago and seeing at first hand the challenges of running the prison in what are, let us say, the more antique wings.

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who I believe has visited Chelmsford prison no fewer than seven times, and to the staff at Chelmsford. When I visited, they had had a very difficult three nights, up night after night dealing with a difficult incident. Chelmsford prison represents one of our local prisons that is going through a huge transition. There is a lot of focus on training new staff and one of the keys here is balancing the right physical infrastructure in prisons with getting the training and leadership right, in particular for new prison officers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Last week, a Defence Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that the Government had awarded a contract to Capita, despite the Ministry of Defence saying it was the highest risk possible for failure—10 out of 10. I just wonder whether this Minister might be able to reassure the House that if Capita comes forward with a bid for any of these contracts and scores a risk of 10 out of 10, it will not be awarded a contract.

Rory Stewart: The general point the hon. Lady is making is difficult to disagree with. Obviously, we need to look at the viability of particular companies. I cannot comment on Capita, or on what exactly the MOD is doing, but when assessing bids the Ministry of Justice will very much take into account the financial viability of the company bidding.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): To maximise the efficacy of any contract, one needs a devoted and focused contracted business, but one also needs expertise in the management of that contract. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the skill set among his officials monitoring contracts on a daily, in-real-time basis is as sharp, professional and focused as it needs to be?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely right. It has traditionally been a challenge to bring those private sector skills into government and to make sure we have a critical mass of...
people who really understand how to stay on top of those contracts, as my hon. Friend says, not just annually but day by day. We are very proud of our director, Ian Power, who focuses on this procurement, particularly in relation to probation, and has those private sector skills. As I said, we also have 25 years of experience here.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I appreciate there are major issues around funding prisons and keeping staff and prisoners safe. The Minister wrote to me about drug scanners in Holme House prison in Stockton North, but he did not address the issue of scanners to detect drugs concealed in prisoners’ bodies when they leave one prison for another. Will we get one soon, or is there not enough money?

Rory Stewart: There are, as the hon. Gentleman points out, two different types of scanner. There is a straightforward x-ray scanner, which will generally pick up on bits of metal and things outside a body. Then there is a millimetre wave scanner, which is able, in certain of our prisons, to detect objects inside the body. These are expensive pieces of kit: in certain cases, they can run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. We are now beginning to roll them out across the estate. I absolutely agree that that is the technological future and we will be piloting them in 10 prisons to see that they do what we both believe they should do.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Glen Parva prison is in my constituency, and I commend the Minister for his welcome announcement yesterday with regard to investment. He said at the Dispatch Box that he welcomes quality and diversity of supplier. May I invite him to speak with his officials to ensure that, wherever possible, local suppliers are invited to bid not just for the construction, but for the maintenance and ongoing supply, of Glen Parva prison?

Rory Stewart: As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, in tendering for public procurement contracts we can look at social aspects, including local supply. I very much look forward to sitting down with my hon. Friend, who is a real champion for local suppliers in his constituency, to see what we can do to make sure, in this and in other contracts where we are putting a prison in a local area, that local businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, have a fair chance to participate in those contracts.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In public or private procurement, what attempts will be made to stop the overuse of solitary confinement as a punishment? My constituent, a young man in his 20s, has on several days been locked up for 23 hours a day. He could well take his own life.

Rory Stewart: We are very aware of the seriousness of solitary confinement. Segregation should be used only in the most exceptional circumstances. It is sometimes unfortunately necessary, but we want to minimise its use. We want to make sure that segregation, above all, is used for rehabilitation and that that opportunity is used to turn someone’s life and behaviour around, so they can get back on to the prison wing and into education and purposeful activity. We will be underscoring, just as the inspector does, the fact that segregation is a last resort.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What my constituents and taxpayers care about is that the prison system delivers value for money, and that when people come out of prison they are equipped to contribute to society and become citizens again, with a second chance at life. Will the Minister say more about how these contracts will help that agenda?

Rory Stewart: This is a very good question. All the 10,000 additional spaces we are bringing in are for category C resettlement prisons. That has been one of the real gaps in the system. We tend to have too many people in local reception prisons and not enough in resettlement prisons, preparing people to make sure they have housing, employment and the right kind of support when they leave. That is vital to getting them a job and stability, and will ultimately prevent reoffending. The entire design of the contracts is to ensure that the prisons, in their architecture and purpose, work for resettlement.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Responsibility for prisons in Northern Ireland, as the Minister well knows, is a devolved matter. He will also be well aware that we have not had a functioning Assembly in Northern Ireland for 18 months, so we have no Justice Minister. Given those circumstances, will he please give reassurance to the Northern Ireland Prison Service—its members are enormously courageous and face risks daily in their jobs—that the prison estate in Northern Ireland will not be neglected in the continued and unfortunate absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in particular that the UK Government are well aware of those daily risks run by members of the Northern Ireland Prison Service? Two of its members have been murdered in recent years. No one has faced justice yet, but I live in hope.

Rory Stewart: I would like to take this opportunity to pay huge tribute to the Northern Ireland Prison Service. Our permanent secretary works very closely with the permanent secretary of the Department of Justice, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working hard to try to bring the devolved Assembly back. We really do feel this. The Northern Ireland Prison Service has very, very unusual conditions, which in some ways makes its work even more challenging than the very challenging work undertaken in England and Wales. These are very courageous individuals doing a very difficult job day in, day out. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s recent statement and his overall progressive approach towards prisons. I welcome, too, the gratitude and appreciation he shows for all who work in the Prison Service. Will he confirm whether, under the previous Labour Government, the use and number of private prisons increased or decreased?

Rory Stewart: This is a beautifully framed question that is clearly teeing me up for something I am unable to use. I am afraid I am not entirely sure, Mr Speaker, what the answer to that question is. I apologise—it is such a beautiful question.
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement. Like the Chairman of the Select Committee, I welcome his approach and that of the Secretary of State to our prisons and to offenders more generally, in particular the female offender strategy and the renewed focus on rehabilitation. Will he consider in due course rolling out the female offender strategy more widely to other prisoners, in particular young offenders?

Rory Stewart: This is a matter for my colleague who has responsibility for the youth estate and the female estate, but there are certainly elements in the female offender strategy that have absolute application not just to the youth estate, but to the adult estate. The basic principles, particularly of a trauma-informed approach to the individual still in custody, should have an effect on everything we do in prisons across the board.

Speaker’s Statement

1.28 pm

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received a letter from the Leader of the House seeking precedence to move a motion to refer to the Committee of Privileges the refusal of Mr Dominic Cummings to attend a meeting of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, in defiance of the Order of the House of 7 June. I am happy to accede to that request, and I will invite the Leader of the House to move such a motion as the first business tomorrow, Thursday 28 June, after any urgent questions or statements.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, Elizabeth Truss and Mr Shailesh Vara, presented a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 2019; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2019; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 238) with explanatory notes (Bill 238-EN).
Toilets (Provision and Accessibility)

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

1.29 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I beg to move, that leave be given to bring in a Bill to require certain buildings to have toilets which meet the needs of persons with a range of disability and accessibility requirements; and for connected purposes.

I realise that access to toilets might sound far from a glamorous political campaign. As a somewhat taboo subject—I am an MP who has often not been afraid to raise taboo subjects in the House—it is rarely mentioned in the media or, indeed, in political debate. Most of us take it for granted, and we rarely hear about it when basic human rights for our citizens are listed, so much is taken as a given. When the subject is raised, it is usually with reference to the developing world where, quite rightly, campaigners seek to raise the importance of people’s access to basic sanitation and hygiene, yet too many people are denied that here in modern Britain as well.

Let me start by making it clear what my Bill means by fully accessible toilets, more commonly known as Changing Places toilets. Changing Places toilets should not be confused with standard disabled toilets. They are designed to meet the needs of people with complex needs, providing a height-adjustable, adult-sized changing bench; a hoist system or mobile hoist; adequate space in the changing area for the disabled person and up to two carers; a centrally placed toilet with room either side; a screen or curtain for privacy; a wide tear-off paper roll to cover the bench; a large waste bin for disposable pads; and a non-slip floor.

As the regulations stand, Changing Places toilets are recommended in larger buildings, such as large train stations, motorway services and museums, but are not mandatory. As a minimum, my Bill seeks to strengthen regulations by making the provision of Changing Places toilets mandatory in large new builds, complexes with public access, or sites where visitors can reasonably be expected to spend long periods of time. I say this to every Member in the House this afternoon: if you are not aware that we have a Changing Places facility here in the Palace of Westminster, please take a moment or two today to establish where it is, because one day soon, somebody might ask you if a Changing Places facility is available in this place. Of course, it is ever important that here in Parliament we seek to set an example.

Such a proposal is the aim of the Changing Places consortium, which launched its campaign in 2006 on behalf of more than a quarter of a million people here in the UK who cannot use standard accessible toilets. That includes 130,000 older people, 40,000 people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, 30,000 people with cerebral palsy, 13,000 people with an acquired brain injury, 8,500 people with multiple sclerosis, 8,000 people with spina bifida and 500 people with motor neurone disease. I am sure that there are many more.

The number of people with complex disabilities is growing. Medical advances mean that more babies are, thankfully, saved when once they might not have been, but often they will require considerable assistance as children and as adults. We are all living longer, and older people make up an ever larger proportion of our population, so the need for extra provision will only become greater. It would be a sad reflection on our society’s priorities if people’s basic freedoms, such as going out with their family or friends, were restricted by the absence of suitable toilet facilities, yet every week, this is a reality for the thousands of people who are denied access to many of our country’s most popular attractions.

While drafting the Bill, I heard from too many people who suffer in this way. Kerry from Milton Keynes has a form of muscular dystrophy and her husband is her full-time carer. She told me:

“Taking a simple trip out these days can be a military operation. We have a checklist of things to take, especially if it’s more than a few hours out. The biggest problem I face when going anywhere is when it comes to using a disabled toilet. Some are simply too small to fit me, wheelchair plus hubby—it can sometimes feel very claustrophobic. I find myself limiting my time out because you just can’t risk the embarrassment of having an accident—which is exactly what I’m doing more times than I care to admit to.”

Adam George, who is 11 years old, requires a toilet with a ceiling hoist and an adult-sized changing table. He loves outdoor activities, and his favourite place to go for a day out is the nearby Flambards theme park, but as he got bigger, the family could not manage with the standard disabled toilet. His mother, Rachel, says she made excuses for a year as to why they could not go, telling him it was closed. After consulting the park about installing equipment to meet Adam’s needs, the family have made the difficult decision to undertake legal action against Flambards. Rachel quite rightly asks:

“Can you imagine not being able to access a toilet on a family day out? Especially one you have just paid a lot of money for? Do you just go to places expecting your toilet needs to be met? Why shouldn’t disabled people expect the same?”

Samantha Buck’s son, Alfie, is seven years old and was born with quadriplegic cerebral palsy after being starved of oxygen at birth. They go into town regularly to shop, to have lunch and to meet up for coffee with other mums and their disabled children and teenagers in the same situation. Samantha explained what she has to go through:

“This is what I am forced to do with my seven-year-old son: I have to lay him on a urine soaked floor inside the disabled loo, with the 2nd carer standing outside with the wheelchair. They have to pass the changing accessories through the open door for all passers by to view. This is one of the most awful experiences I have to face every time I come into town.”

Samantha set about campaigning for better facilities for Alfie and the thousands of people who face the same struggles as them every day. I am glad to tell the House that her local council has now agreed to put in two Changing Places toilets, but she feels that the responsibility should not just be for parents and carers to lobby councils.

Current data suggests that there are only 1,123 Changing Places toilets in the UK, with the highest concentrations in major cities. Some areas do not have a facility even within an hour’s drive, so people are either confined in their home, need to rush back if nature calls, or have to face the indignity of being changed on the dirty floors of public toilets. Needless to say, the result can be social isolation. The availability of even the existing facilities is under threat, as public services such as libraries are being closed. Often, those buildings provided the only
Changing Places facilities in an area but, sadly, that is rarely a priority when local authority budgets bear the brunt of unprecedented cuts. In my area of Kirklees, the nearest Changing Places toilet was lost when the local children’s playground closed due to Government cuts.

Another issue is that many accessible toilets are provided for children, but not the adults who also need them. A hospital local to my area has its Changing Places toilet situated on the children’s ward. Unfortunately, adults with disabilities cannot access it for safeguarding reasons. We need to urgently rethink our attitude to toilets. Simply labelling a facility as “disabled” or “accessible” does not guarantee that it will be suitable. Most do not have a hoist system or a large changing bench. Disabled and accessible toilets have been found with no level access, and with heavy or narrow doors that are not automated, often with unsuitable or unclean handles and locks. Diverse facilities are also needed to reflect the diversity of the people who need them. Some people need bright fluorescent lights or air fresheners to reduce anxiety, whereas those can lead to sensory overload for others.

My Bill addresses one of those issues that sometimes suffers from being a bit taboo, but for the sake of those who suffer in silence, I believe it must be tackled head on. I hope that the whole House will join me in this campaign.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paula Sherriff, Nic Dakin, Robert Halfon, Layla Moran, Gill Furniss, Tracy Brabin, Rushanara Ali, Mary Creagh, Ruth Smeeth, Chris Elmore, Mr Kevan Jones and Marsha De Cordova present the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 239).
As the strategy makes clear, the rise in violent crime is due to many factors, including changes in the drugs market. A crucial part of the strategy is also about focusing on early intervention and prevention, which is why we are investing £11 million in an early intervention youth fund, running a national campaign to tell young people about the risks of carrying a knife, and taking action against online videos that glorify and encourage violence. To oversee this important work, we have set up a taskforce that includes hon. Members from both sides of the House, the police, the Mayor of London, community groups and other Departments. I hope that this is just the first stage of us all working together across parties and sectors.

The Bill covers three main areas: acid attacks, knife crime and the risks posed by firearms.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary’s commitment to tackling serious and violent crime, which we know has such devastating consequences for families. I also agree about the importance of prevention, as well as the legislative measures. Given that some of the measures announced in the serious and violent crime strategy were concentrated around London, Birmingham and Nottingham, and that we have had awful stabbings in Leeds, Wolverhampton and Ipswich, what more will he do to make sure that the prevention work is done right across the country?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the right hon. Lady’s support and the work she does on the Home Affairs Select Committee, which she chairs, to scrutinise this type of work. She is right that some of the announcements on the community fund to help with early intervention have focused on big cities, but this is just the start. We have more funding to allocate and are already talking to community groups well spread throughout the country. As I said right at the start, although there has been much debate about London and other big cities—we just heard about Birmingham—that suffer from these crimes, they are widespread and extend to our smaller towns and, in some cases, villages, so we have to look at all parts of the country.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, there is some concern among Conservative Members about the proposal in the Bill to ban .5 calibre weapons, because it would criminalise otherwise law-abiding users of a weapon which, as far as I know, has never been used in a murder. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to enter into full discussions with his Ministers before the Committee stage?

Sajid Javid: I will say a bit more about that in a moment, but my hon. Friend has raised an important issue, and I am glad that he has focused on it. The Bill does make some changes in relation to high-energy rifles and other such weapons. We based those measures on evidence that we received from intelligence sources, police and other security experts. That said, I know that my hon. Friend and other colleagues have expertise, and evidence that they too wish to provide. I can give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance that I am ready to listen to him and others, and to set their evidence against the evidence that we have received.
Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I generally welcome the Bill, but I should point out that the measures he is talking about mean banning the weapons. They relate to both a 200 bullet kit and very loud fire which, as far as I know, have never been used for a single crime in this country. It is probably the gun least likely ever to be used in a crime. Is the Secretary of State aware that in pursuing this policy without good evidence, he is losing the confidence of the entire sport-shooting community for no good reason?

Sajid Javid: According to the information that we have, weapons of this type have, sadly, been used in the troubles in Northern Ireland, and, according to intelligence provided by police and security services, have been possessed by criminals who have clearly intended to use them. That said, I know that my hon. Friend speaks with significant knowledge of this issue, and I would be happy to listen to his views and those of others.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): If we follow my right hon. Friend’s logic, we must conclude that literally every single weapon should be banned. Having served in Northern Ireland myself, I know that there is no end to saying that everything should be banned. If we accept that these weapons are not likely to be used if they are properly secured and controlled, we should think carefully about banning them. If we just go on banning weapons, we will not achieve what we want. In Waltham Forest where I live, handguns are available to any criminal who wants to use them, but those are banned as well. The right people cannot use weapons, but the wrong people certainly carry on using them.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes the point that our response must be proportionate, and we must ensure that banning firearms leads to the right outcome. He has alluded to his own experience in this regard, and I hope he is reassured by my indication that I am happy to talk to colleagues about the issue. He has also mentioned the need for control and proper possession of any type of weapon that could be used in the wrong way. The Bill contains clear measures based on the evidence that has been brought to us thus far, but I am happy to listen to what others have to say.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) referred to the pervasive nature of the culture that is leading to violent crime. Will my right hon. Friend work with other Departments on some of the drivers of that culture? Some people are driven by the internet and social media, but there may be other malevolent sources of information that lead people into the business of crime. This will require a great deal of lateral thinking, and I know my former apprentice is capable of that.

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point. He speaks with experience of the Home Office, and my predecessor as Home Secretary established the Serious Violence Taskforce for precisely this reason. I have already held my own first meeting of the taskforce. Each meeting leads to action, and, as I mentioned earlier, the last one led to action on social mobility and online activity. However, there are also roles for the Department for Education, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and other Departments. They will need to do their bit, because, as my right hon. Friend says, this will require cross-governmental action.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spoken of the drivers of this type of crime, and the changing nature of the drugs market. I wrote to him this week about the “zombie” drugs, such as mamba, which are affecting my town centre. Is the Bill likely to lead to crackdowns on those new drugs?

Sajid Javid: The Bill does not focus on drugs, but my hon. Friend has made an important point. It is clear from the evidence that we have seen at the Home Office that changes in the drugs market are a major factor in the rise in serious violence, not just in the UK but in other European countries and the United States. We want to take a closer look at the issue to establish whether more work can be done on it.

The Bill covers three main areas: acid attacks, knife crime, and the risks posed by firearms. We have consulted widely on these measures, and have worked closely with the police and others to ensure that we are giving them the powers that they need. The measures on corrosives will stop young people getting hold of particularly dangerous acids, the measures on online knife sales will stop young people getting hold of knives online, and the measures on the possession of offensive weapons will give the police the powers that they need to act when people are in possession of flick knives, zombie knives, and other particularly dangerous knives that have absolutely no place in our homes and communities. I believe that the Bill strengthens the law where that is most needed, and gives the police the tools that they need to protect the public.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I support the Bill—I do not want the Home Secretary to think otherwise—but may I make a point about clause 1? When it comes to refusing to sell goods to individuals, it is shop staff who will be on the front line, and it is shop staff who may be attacked or threatened as a result. Would the Home Secretary consider introducing in Committee an aggravated offence of attacks on shop staff? They, like everyone else, deserve freedom from fear.

Sajid Javid: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s support for the Bill. As he will understand, we want to restrict sales of these items in order to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands, but he has made an interesting point about those who may feel that they are under some threat, particularly from the kind of people who would try to buy knives of this type in the first place. If he will allow me, I will go away and think a bit more about what he has said.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Sheffield, like other cities, is deeply affected by a rise in knife crime, and I strongly support the Bill’s objectives in that regard. However, our city is also famous for knife manufacturing, and a number of local companies have expressed concern to me about the blanket prohibition of sales to residential addresses, which they fear could have unintended consequences. As the Bill progresses, will the Home Secretary consider alternative ways of achieving its objectives—for example, an online knife
dealers’ scheme that would be mandatory for all distance selling, with age verification standards set by the International Organisation for Standardisation?

**Sajid Javid**: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but, as he will know, before we settled on any of these measures—particularly the one dealing with knives—there was an extensive consultation involving many people, including manufacturers from the great city of Sheffield and other parts of the UK. I hope it is of some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman that, while it is true that deliveries to solely residential addresses will be prohibited, deliveries to businesses operating from residences will not. There are some other defences which I think will help with the issue that he has raised. For example, the prohibition will not apply to table knives, knives to be used for sporting purposes, knives to be used for re-enactment purposes, or hand-made knives. I hope that that indicates to the hon. Gentleman that we have thought carefully about the issue, but if he has any other suggestions, he should write to me and I will consider them.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): The UK already has a reputation for having the strongest and best firearms legislation across Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the intention of this Bill is to make sure dangerous knives and toxic chemicals are equally strongly legislated against, but it is not the intention to take action against law-abiding citizens?

**Sajid Javid**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I could not have put it better myself. She will know that there are already some restrictions on knives; for example, there are restrictions on buying the so-called zombie knives, but there is no restriction on possessing them at present. Part of the Bill’s intention is to fill in some of those obvious gaps, as members of the public have asked why the Government have not addressed them before.

**Mr Alister Jack** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I think the point my hon. Friend raised is a concern that many hon. Members will have. The person who owns the firearm may not be the person who holds it or the person who uses it. The Bill, as it stands, will affect people’s rights to keep law-abiding citizens’ firearms. Would he be open to an amendment along those lines?

**Sajid Javid**: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, this was consulted on during the preparation of the Bill. We settled at 18 and I do not think we are interested in moving from that, but he does deserve an explanation: 18 is used as the legal age between child and adult for a number of things, and it felt to us to be the right age. It is also an age that is consistent with other Acts of Parliament. We think it is the appropriate age to set the limit on some of the measures in the Bill.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It was clear from the consultation on high-calibre rifles that their owners were prepared to look at measures to make sure that those rifles were made as safe as possible so they did not fall into the wrong hands, yet the Government now intend to ban them. Will the Secretary of State look at the consultation again and at the assurances people were prepared to give, and make sure those law-abiding citizens are not adversely affected?

**Sajid Javid**: I hope the hon. Gentleman has heard some of the comments made around this issue over the past 20 minutes or so. I do understand the arguments around the issue, and of course he would expect the Home Office to listen to arguments on the other side as well, which as he says have had an input into the Bill. I am more than happy to listen to colleagues on both sides of the House on that issue and any other issues around the Bill.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State will have received correspondence from the Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. One of the issues my constituents have asked me about is the compensation clause for weapons that might be taken back or retrieved. How will the value of the firearms be calculated, and where will the money for the compensation come from? Will it come from Northern Ireland or the UK centrally? Will people who surrender firearms face questioning or checks that might dissuade them from surrendering their firearms? We must have good communication with those who hold firearms and will be impacted greatly by this.

**Sajid Javid**: The hon. Gentleman will know that these measures in the Bill are devolved in the case of Northern Ireland, and some of the issues he raised about compensation and how it is calculated may well be decisions that eventually the Northern Ireland Government, once in place, will reach. In England and in Scotland if it consents, we have set out how compensation can work, and our intention is to make sure it is reasonable and it works, and that is not just in the case of firearms, but there is a general compensation clause. It is harder for me to answer that question in respect of Northern Ireland as ultimately that decision will not be made by the Home Office; it will be a decision that the Northern Ireland Government will have to settle on.
Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the way in which he is approaching Second Reading; it demonstrates that Second Readings of Bills are extremely important and should happen with great regularity. May I commend to him the work in Hertfordshire and Broxbourne council to bring together agencies across the county and boroughs to deal with knife crime? There is a role for local politicians and local agencies in addressing this really complicated issue.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: ultimately, only so much can be done by the centre. The centre can set the laws and provide funding in certain cases, but much of the work being done, as we have seen with the serious violence taskforce, is community and locally led, and I join him in commending the work in Hertfordshire. We are very much aware of that in the Department, and it sets an example for many other parts of the country.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Building on the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), there is an important leadership role for police and crime commissioners working alongside the local constabulary and the other partners that have been mentioned. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State or his colleague, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, share with us, if not today, at a later date, what they consider to be best practice in terms of real leadership on the ground and partnership building to help tackle the problems that we all face?

Sajid Javid: In the serious violence strategy published in April there were some examples of good practice, but my hon. Friend makes the point that since then, because of the use of some of the funds for example that were in that strategy, we have seen other good examples. We will be very happy to share them with my hon. Friend.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor who has treated children with both stab and gunshot wounds, I commend my right hon. Friend on what he is doing to try to reduce the violence and the threat of violence on our streets but, equally, as a Conservative I am not keen to ban things that do not need to be banned. In the past, we banned handguns; what effect has that had on knife crime? There is a role for local politicians and local agencies in addressing this really complicated issue.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for the measures in the Bill. She has raised particular questions about Northern Ireland. She will know that, because these matters are devolved and the police have operational independence, how they deal with the issues presented by the Bill and other cross-border issues will be a matter for them. She referred to evidence given to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this morning, which unfortunately I did not listen to. If she wants to provide me with more information on that, and on how she thinks the Bill might fit in with it, I would be happy to look at that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I must go on, as a number of colleagues want to contribute to the debate.

Turning to acid attacks, of course it is wrong that young people can buy substances that can be used to cause severe pain and to radically alter someone’s face, body and life. There is no reason why industrial-strength acids should be sold to young people, and the Bill will stop that happening. We will ban the sale of the most dangerous corrosives to under-18s, both online and offline. We want to stop acid being used as a weapon. At the moment, the police are limited in what they can do if they think a gang on the street might be carrying acid. The Bill will provide them with the power to stop and search and to confiscate any acid.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend is saying about acid. Will he give further thought in Committee to the question of the private purchase of these fantastically corrosive acids? Does he agree that there is little point in restricting their sale to those below the age of 18, because those over that age can also get very annoyed and use those substances to the devastating effect that he has set out?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but the evidence that we have seen shows that the real issue is about young people getting their hands on this acid. We have seen examples of them getting hold of it and separating it into two mineral water bottles, then carrying it around and using it to devastating effect. The measures that we have here, alongside the measures on possession of acid in a public place, will combine to make a big difference to the situation we find ourselves in today.
Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Sajid Javid: On acid?

Sir Edward Davey: Yes. The Home Secretary is absolutely right to legislate for this offence. Will he tell the House how he and his colleagues will ensure that local authorities, trading standards, the police and others will be supported in enforcing this offence, to ensure that the new powers are actually used?

Sajid Javid: I must point out that when I said to the right hon. Gentleman, “On acid?” I was not asking him if he was on acid. It was a more general question, although I noticed that he readily jumped up and said yes. He makes an important point about ensuring that once the changes are made, all those who need to be aware of them will get training in the process of bringing them about. As he knows, this will involve trading standards and local authorities, and we are in touch with those groups. By the time the Bill has progressed and hopefully achieved Royal Assent, we will have worked quite intensively with the groups that have an interest in this to ensure that the measures in the Bill are well understood.

If I may turn to knives, it is already against the law to sell knives to under-18s, but some online sellers effectively ignore this. Sadly, such knives can get into the hands of young people and this has led to tragic deaths. We will stop that by ensuring that proper age checks are in place at the point of sale. We will stop the delivery to a home address of knives that can cause serious injury. We will also crack down on the overseas sales of knives by making it an offence to deliver them to a person under 18 in this country. I find it appalling that vicious weapons are on open sale and easily available. It shocks me that flick knives are still available despite being banned as long ago as 1959, and that zombie knives, knuckledusters and other dreadful weapons are still in wide circulation. The Bill will therefore make it an offence to possess such weapons, whether in private or on the streets, and it will go further and extend the current ban on offensive weapons in schools to further education premises.

Andrew Rosindell: A young man was murdered with a knife in terrible circumstances in Romford on Saturday evening. We can ban these weapons if we like, but the Home Secretary needs to be aware that if someone with criminal intent wants to get hold of one, they will find a way. I commend the Bill and I will support it, but surely we should also be looking at how young people are being brought up. We should look at what is happening in the home and in schools and at whether young people are being taught the values of right and wrong and behaving in a decent way. They can learn this from early childhood, and schools have a role to play in enforcing discipline. Parental guidance and strong support from families are also important. The family unit is important if young people are to grow up in a society where they can live freely without committing these kinds of crimes. Should we not be looking at the whole thing in a rounded way, not just banning things? Should we not be looking at how we can ensure that young people grow up to be good citizens of this country?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has raised the death of Jordan Douherty, which tragically occurred this weekend following a knife attack, and I am glad that he has made that important point. While the Bill can achieve a few things—we have talked about acid and knives falling into the wrong hands, for example—no Bill can by itself stop someone who is intent on taking this kind of vicious action. As he says, that requires a much more holistic approach to ensure that all aspects of government and non-Government bodies, charities and others are involved. Education is also a vital part of that, as is parenting. In some cases, there is better parenting, but there are no easy answers to any of this. He is absolutely right to suggest that we need to have a much more holistic approach. I can assure him that this is exactly why the serious violence taskforce has been created, and this is exactly the kind of work that we are trying to achieve.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that, tragically, we have had nine deaths related to youth violence in my constituency over the past year. I have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has just said, but these things can happen to any family. The groomers out there find children from all kinds of families, and I do not want anyone watching this debate to believe that it cannot happen to them or to their children. We all need to be vigilant, and I am looking forward to the progress that the Home Secretary’s working party will make.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. She has made a vital point. Sadly, anyone can be on the receiving end of this violence. Tragically, we see that in the UK every year, but we all recognise that there has been a significant increase this year, and we need to work together to combat that. Anyone can be a victim.

Finally, I want to turn to an issue that we seem to have discussed in some detail already: the measure on firearms. The Bill will prohibit certain powerful firearms including high-energy rifles and rapid-firing rifles. As we have heard, hon. Members on both sides of the House have different views on this. While preparing the Bill, we have listened to evidence from security, police and other experts, but I am more than happy to listen to hon. Members from both sides, to take their views into account and to work with them to ensure that we do much more to bring about increased public safety.

Lady Hermon: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Sajid Javid: I will take one final intervention, then conclude.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary for allowing me to intervene again. He will be well aware that, yesterday, the Deputy Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland was appointed as the Garda commissioner, which is a brilliant appointment. One of the means by which the Home Office should try to ensure that the dangerous corrosive substances and knives banned under the legislation will not come across the border from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland—we will not have physical infrastructure on the border after Brexit—is to call the new Garda commissioner and his new team when he is in post. I make that warm recommendation following that excellent appointment to the Garda Síochana in the Republic of Ireland.
Sajid Javid: I commend the Garda on their appointment. The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service will be in touch with the new head of the Garda in his new role. I am very glad to have an opportunity to discuss such cross-border issues and see how we can co-operate even more.

I hope the measures in the Bill will attract widespread support on both sides of the House. They fill an important gap in the law, and they give the police, prosecutors and others the tools they need to fight these terrible crimes. The Bill will help to make all our communities safer by helping to get dangerous weapons off our streets. As Home Secretary, I will be relentless in ensuring that our streets remain safe. I commend the Bill to the House.

2.21 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is important to begin on a note of agreement. The Opposition pledged in this House that the Government would have our support if they came forward with measures on acid sale and possession and further measures to combat knife crime, so we will support the limited but necessary measures in the Bill. Throughout the Committee stage, we will take a constructive approach in areas in which we believe it needs strengthening.

In and of themselves, the measures cannot bear down on a violent surge that has left communities reeling. That will require a much more comprehensive change. It is as well to look at the context of the Bill. Knife crime offences reached record levels in the year to December 2017. Homicides involving knives increased by 22%, and violent crime overall has more than doubled in the past five years to a record level. The senseless murder of 15-year-old Jordan Douherty, who was stabbed after a birthday party in Romford community centre over the weekend, brought the number of murder investigations to over 80 in London alone this year.

As we have heard, the problem is far from being just a London one. In my home city of Sheffield, which historically and until very recently was considered to be one of the safest cities in the UK, there was a 51% increase in violent crime last year on a 62% increase the year before. That is not a spike or a blip, but a trend enveloping a generation of young people and it requires immediate national action.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that what is omitted is of far greater consequence than what has made it into the Government’s serious violence strategy and their legislative response today. First, it must be said that unveiling a strategy that made no mention of police numbers was a serious mistake that reinforced the perception that tiptoeing around the Prime Minister’s legacy at the Home Office matters more than community safety. The Home Secretary might not want today’s debate to be about police numbers, because a dangerous delusion took hold of his predecessors that police numbers do not make the blindest bit of difference to the rise in serious violence, but that view is not widely shared. The Met Commissioner Cressida Dick has said she is “certain” that police cuts have contributed to serious violence. Home Office experts have said it is likely that police cuts have contributed too. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary said in March that the police were under such strain that the lives of vulnerable people were being put at risk, with forces so stretched that they cannot respond to emergency calls.

Charge rates for serious violence have fallen as the detective crisis continues, undermining the deterrent effect, but still Ministers pretend that a staggering reduction of more than 21,000 police officers since 2010 has had no impact whatsoever.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In the west midlands, the Labour police and crime commissioner has been able to raise additional funds through an increase in the precept, yet he has chosen to put no extra police on the beat, particularly in my constituency. Regardless of how much money is available, we have to get over the obstacle that police and crime commissioners might decide to spend it differently.

Louise Haigh: Recruitment is a matter for chief constables. My understanding is that West Midlands police are undergoing a recruitment drive. Obviously, I cannot speak to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but how chief constables spend the money the precept raises is up to them. The issue we have with using the precept to raise funds for the police—the House has rehearsed this time and again—is that a 2% increase in council tax in areas such as the west midlands will raise significantly less than in other areas of the country such as Surrey or Suffolk. That is why we opposed that fundamentally unfair way to increase funding for our police forces.

The reduction in the number of officers has reduced the ability of the police to perform hotspot proactive policing and targeted interventions that gather intelligence and build relationships with communities. These not only help the police to respond to crime but help them to prevent it from happening in the first place. That is the bedrock of policing in our country. Community policing enables policing by consent, but has been decimated over the past eight years. That has contributed not only to the rise in serious violence but to the corresponding fall in successful prosecutions. Not only are more people committing serious violent offences, but more are getting away with it.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. She will be aware that I have long campaigned for Cardiff to get additional resources because of the challenges it has as a capital city. I am glad that the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has agreed to meet me, the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner in south Wales to discuss these very real concerns. Does my hon. Friend agree that community policing resources are absolutely crucial? Community police can deal with the grooming that my hon. Friend, who is a committed campaigner for Cardiff to receive the police resources it needs. That is why the Labour manifesto put neighbourhood policing at its heart. Neighbourhood policing not only enables the police to respond better to crime, but it is an important intelligence-gathering tool for tackling terrorism, more serious crime and organised criminal activity.

The proposals in the Bill to strengthen the law to meet the changing climate are welcome, but, without adequate enforcement, they cannot have the effect we need them to have. The Government must drop their
dangerous delusion that cutting the police by more than any other developed country over the past eight years bar Iceland, Lithuania and Bulgaria has not affected community safety. They must make a cast-iron commitment that in the spending review they will give the police the resources they need to restore the strength of neighbourhood policing so recklessly eroded over the past eight years.

Andrew Rosindell: One problem in my constituency following the murder on Saturday evening is the feeling that the police do not have enough resources. I agree with the hon. Lady. We cannot keep reducing resources for policing and say it will not have an effect on crime; clearly it will. However, Havering in my area, for example, is part of Greater London, so the resources are allocated by the Mayor of London. Our area gets far less than other parts of London. Yes, let us have more resources, but does the hon. Lady agree that areas like mine need a fairer slice of the cake? If crime is moving out to areas such as Essex, we need resources. We are not inner London—we are completely different—and therefore need a different style of policing and adequate resources to make our communities safe.

Louise Haigh: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that resources should follow demand. That is why it is a crying shame that the Government have kicked the can down the road on the police funding formula, which has denied resources to areas of the country that are in serious need of police resources. That funding formula should be based on demand.

Vicky Ford: Following the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), will the hon. Lady join me in thanking Essex police and congratulating them on the 150 officers they are adding to our force?

Louise Haigh: It is welcome when any police force recruits additional police officers. I do not have to hand the number of officers that Essex has lost since 2010, but I imagine that it is significantly more than 150.

Let us look at the Home Office research on the drivers of trends in violent crime. Neighbourhood policing was certainly mentioned; social media was acknowledged to have played a role, as were changes to the drug market, as the Home Secretary mentioned, particularly in respect of the purity of crack cocaine. They are all factors in the rate of recent murders, but one of the most important factors that the analysis showed was that a larger cohort of young people are now particularly vulnerable to involvement in violent crime because of significant increases in the numbers of homeless children, children in care and children excluded from school. Just 2% of the general population have been excluded from school, compared with 49% of the prison population. As much as this Bill is, and should be, about taking offensive weapons off our streets, the issues around serious violent crime are also a story of vulnerability.

The Children’s Commissioner has shown that 70,000 under-25-year-olds are currently feared to be part of gang networks. The unavoidable conclusion is that, for a growing, precarious and highly vulnerable cohort of children, the structures and safety nets that are there to protect them are failing.

Behind this tragic spate of violence is a story of missed opportunities to intervene as services retreat; of children without a place to call home shunted between temporary accommodation, with the risk of violent crime at the mercy of private landlords; of patterns of truancy and expulsions; and of troubled families ignored until the moment of crisis hits. The most despicable criminals are exploiting the space where well-run and effective early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies once existed.

As the Children’s Commissioner notes, the pursuit of young children is now “a systematic and well-rehearsed business model.”

The Home Secretary himself highlighted the importance of early intervention in tackling violence when he told “The Andrew Marr Show” that we must deal with the root causes, but the £20 million a year we spend on early intervention and prevention has to be seen in the context of the £387 million cut from youth services, the £1 billion cut from children’s services, and the £2.7 billion cut from school budgets since 2015. For most communities, the funding provided by the serious violence strategy will not make any difference at all. How can it even begin to plug the gap?

We know what happens when early intervention disappears. A groundbreaking report 18 years ago by the Audit Commission described the path of a young boy called James who found himself at the hard end of the criminal justice system before the last Labour Government’s progressive efforts to address the root causes of crime through early intervention:

“Starting at the age of five, his mother persistently requested help in managing his behaviour and addressing his learning difficulties. Despite formal assessments at an early age for special educational needs, no educational help was forthcoming until he reached the age of eight and even then no efforts were made to address his behaviour problems in the home. By the age of ten, he had his first brush with the law but several requests for a learning mentor came to nothing and his attendance at school began to suffer. By now he was falling behind his peers and getting into trouble at school, at home and in his…neighbourhood…

Within a year James was serving an intensive community supervision order and…only then did the authorities acknowledge that the family had multiple problems and needed a full assessment. A meeting of professionals was arranged but no one directly involved with James, other than his Head Teacher, attended, no social worker was allocated and none of the plans that were drawn up to help James were implemented. Within a short space of time, he was sent to a Secure Training Centre and on release…no services were received by James or his family. He was back in custody within a few months.”

How many Jameses have we come across in our constituencies? How many mothers like James’s have we met in our surgeries? The pattern described here could just as well be attributed to a young man I had been seeking to help over the past year but whose life was tragically ended just last month. He was stabbed to death in my constituency, and another 15-year-old charged with his murder.

It very much feels as though we have learned these lessons before and are now repeating the same mistakes.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Given the intelligence we have received that the Mayor of London is doubling his PR budget, what role does the hon. Lady think he can play in trying to address the urgent problem in this city?
Louise Haigh: The Mayor of London has put £150 million into recruiting additional police officers. I appreciate the serious concerns in London but this is a national problem, as I have made clear and as the Home Secretary has acknowledged. This is not a London-only problem. Indeed, the increase in violence in London is actually lower than in other parts of the country, which is why a national solution is required. It is politically easy to pass the blame on to the Mayor of London, but it simply is not the case that that is the only solution.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady is speaking huge common sense, as everyone in this House knows. Anyone who looks at our prison population knows that people in prison are suffering from mental health problems and learning disabilities, all of which could have been dealt with through early intervention. I ask her not to be put off by completely irrelevant interventions.

Louise Haigh: The right hon. Gentleman need not worry; I will not be put off at all by interventions from Government Members.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): The hon. Lady mentions that this is not only a London problem, but a lot of it does emanate from London. The county line operations and many other things start in our big cities, so will she join me in encouraging the Metropolitan police to work far more closely with other forces to make sure we break these county lines? The county lines are now heading across the country, but they largely start in London.

Louise Haigh: I completely agree that the county lines emanate from many metropolitan areas, and certainly not just London—they originate with organised criminal gangs in Birmingham and on Merseyside, too. I commend the Government’s approach through the national county lines co-ordination centre. Working between police forces is a nut that we really have to crack, because the county lines business model has been developed to exploit the challenges that police forces and other agencies experience in working together.

Andrew Rosindell: I agree with much of what the hon. Lady says, but can she envisage how local people in Havering feel? We are part of Essex, yet we are lumped into Greater London. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) proudly speaks of 150 new policemen for Essex, but people who come to Romford will realise that we are Essex, rather than London. However, we get so few resources from the Mayor of London—we really are left out. We are getting no extra policemen and far fewer resources than we need.

Will the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) please speak to Sadiq Khan and see whether he will prioritise the London Borough of Havering and give us the resources we need, or whether he will give us the chance to be a unitary authority outside of the Greater London area so we can manage our own resources and keep our communities safe?

Louise Haigh: I am sure Chelmsford has received both policemen and policewomen. I am sure the Mayor of London will be watching this debate closely, but I commit to passing the hon. Gentleman’s remarks on to him.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making some excellent points, and she will recognise that in Wales the Welsh Labour Government have invested in keeping police community support officers in our communities, which has made a huge difference in my own community. Will she also pay tribute to the many voluntary organisations that are working with young people in particular? Tiger Bay and Llanrumney Phoenix amateur boxing clubs in my patch are working with young people who are very much at risk of being groomed or caught up in such things, and they are making a huge impact on those individuals’ lives.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful for that intervention. Across the country, such community organisations are filling a vacuum that has been created by Government cuts over the past eight years. They are doing sterling work with at-risk young people, and preventing many of them from falling into exploitation and violence.

I take this opportunity to commend the work of the Scottish Government not just through the violence reduction unit, which I am sure we will hear much of in today’s debate, but in their commitment to long-term research on the patterns of youth offending and violence.

The last major national study of youth crime in England and Wales was 10 years ago, which means we do not know the impact of social media or, indeed, of austerity. We urge the Government to repeat that survey, to commission research on why young people carry weapons and on the risk factors that lead to violent offending, and to commission an evidence-based analysis of the success of various interventions. That could build on the excellent work led by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who pioneered the Youth Violence Commission.

In Scotland, the Edinburgh study of youth transitions and crime found that violent offenders are significantly more likely than non-violent young people to be victims of crime and adult harassment, to be engaged in self-harm and para-suicidal behaviour, to be drug users or regular alcohol users and, for girls in particular, to be from a socially deprived background.

Although, of course, I accept wholeheartedly the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) that any young person can be at risk of exploitation, it is in the public good for such vulnerable young people to receive targeted interventions at a young age, rather than to see them fall into the costly criminal justice system and their lives wasted. We hope to see significantly more action from the Government on that.

Vicky Ford: I am a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, and we have been looking at the evidence on early intervention. As has been highlighted, there are areas of excellent practice, including Manchester and, I am glad to say, Essex. Will the hon. Lady look at those areas of excellent practice? I reject the suggestion that, somehow, this is linked to cuts. Our good practice in delivering early intervention helps to make the difference.

Louise Haigh: I heartily recommend that the hon. Lady reads the Home Office’s own analysis, which suggests that cuts to neighbourhood policing and early intervention have played a part in the rise of serious
violence, but of course I accept that some excellent work is going on throughout the country. That is exactly the point I am making: we need a proper evidence-based analysis of that work to make sure that we roll out the successful pilots.

Let me turn to the possession and sale of corrosives. We welcome the move to clarify the law. In March, the Sentencing Council explicitly listed acid as a potentially dangerous weapon, but it is welcome that that is made clear in the legislation. Nevertheless, concerns remain about the lack of controls on reportable substances. We welcome the passing of secondary legislation to designate sulphuric acid as a reportable substance, but the time has come for a broader look at the two classes of poisons to determine which are causing harm and should therefore be subject to stricter controls.

The purpose of the legislation prior to the Deregulation Act 2015 was to allow the sale of commonly used products while protecting the individual from their inherent dangers. The sale of such poisons as hydrochloric, ammonia, hydrofluoric, nitric and phosphoric acids was restricted to retail pharmacies and to businesses whose premises were on local authorities’ lists of sellers. That situation was not perfect, but in considering reform we should note that the Poisons Board preferred a third option, between the previous system and what we have today, which would have designated as regulated all poisons listed as reportable substances, meaning that they could be sold only in registered pharmacies, with buyers required to enter their details.

The Government have conceded the point that some acids that are currently on open sale are dangerous and so should not be sold to under-18s. Schedule 1 lists hydrochloric acid and ammonia as two such examples, but we know that only one in five acid attacks are conducted by under-18s. That means that four in five attackers will be free to purchase reportable substances despite the clear evidence of harm. Of the 408 reported acid attacks, ammonia was used in 69 incidents. In the light of that, will the Government conduct a full review of the designation of reportable substances and bring forward regulations to re-designate those causing clear harm?

We note that the Government have failed to extend to corrosive substances the specific provisions on the possession of knives in schools. There can surely be no justification, beyond a reasonable defence, for the possession of corrosive substances on a school premises. If we are to send a message that the possession of corrosive substances will be treated with the same seriousness as the possession of knives, it should follow that the provisions that apply in respect of knives in schools are extended to acid.

On knife possession, the measures on remote sales and residential premises are important, but a cursory internet search demonstrates the easy availability of a wide range of weapons that are terrifying in their familiarity: knives disguised as credit cards and as bracelets; weapons designed with the explicit purpose to harm and to conceal. With the increasing use of such weapons and the widespread use of machetes in certain parts of the country, we wish to explore with the Government what further action can be taken to bear down on such pernicious weapons, and how apps and platforms on which such weapons are made readily available can be held to account.

As the Bill is considered in Committee, we wish to explore the concerns, mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) earlier, of retailers and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers about the offences imposed on retailers.

David Hanson: As the chair of the USDAW group of MPs—I declare that interest—I welcome that commitment. I was greatly encouraged by the fact that the Home Secretary said that he will look into this issue. I hope that we can consider it on a cross-party basis to ensure that shop workers are free from fear and that regulations can be put in place to make sure that we defend those who will have to defend the Bill’s provisions on the frontline, in shops.

Louise Haigh: My right hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner for the rights of shop workers and I echo his point about hoping that we can do this on a cross-party basis.

Concerns remain about the open sale of knives in smaller retail stores, which is an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). Many of the larger stores have taken steps to secure knives in cabinets, but the fact that it is far too easy to steal knives from smaller stores renders much of the control of knife sales ineffective.

It was surprising to see that higher education institutions have been omitted from the extension of possession offences, given that they were considered in the consultation earlier this year. The justification that the Government gave for the proposal then was, I think, right, so I am interested to hear why higher education institutions have been omitted from the Bill.

On firearms, the laws in the UK are among the toughest in the world, but there is concern that restricted supply might be leading to the repurposing of obsolete firearms, meaning that law enforcement must be alive to the changing nature of firearms use. There has been a significant rise in the use of antique guns that have been repurposed to commit serious crime: 30% of the guns used in crime in 2015-16 were of obsolete calibre. The repurposing of handguns designed to fire gun canisters, and of imitation weapons, has grown in the past 10 years. We intend to press the Government on whether the laws surrounding decommissioned firearms, which are not subject to the Firearms Act 1968, need to be strengthened. The availability of firearms has been shown to be increasing through the legal-to-illegal route, so we very much support the Government’s proposals.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, but as someone who has recently renewed their shotgun licence, I should say that that is a very thorough process. I would not want the wrong impression to be given of people who shoot for sport—I shoot only clay; I do not shoot animals—because it is a very responsible sport.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend brings his own personal experience to the debate and makes an important point. I am sure that will be heard in Committee.

Finally, we believe that the Bill is a missed opportunity for victims. The Conservative party manifestos in 2015 and 2017 promised to enshrine in law the rights of victims, a group too often neglected by the criminal
Justice system. With crime surging and the perpetrators of crime more likely than ever to escape justice, the Bill should have gone further and looked to strengthen the rights of victims of crime.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way yet again. On the point about repurposing or reactivating deactivated firearms, will she mention for the record that of course the reactivation of a deactivated firearm is in itself a criminal act?

Louise Haigh: Yes, and I was not trying to suggest otherwise, but, as I have laid out, the number of crimes using repurposed weapons has increased significantly over the past 10 years, so it is clear that in considering the Bill we should look into how we can restrict the availability of decommissioned weapons.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): On the subject of a victims law, Sharon Fearon is the mother of Shaquan, a young boy who was murdered in my constituency, and there was never a conviction in that case. Sharon and I met Minister after Minister, including the Attorney General, and the one thing we were promised was that there would be a victims law and that their voices would be heard.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend has done sterling work over the past three years on youth violence, and particularly on the rights of victims, and her work is one of the reasons we think it is so important to strengthen the rights of victims through this Bill. I hope that we can do that on a cross-party basis, given the promises that were made in the 2015 and 2017 Conservative manifestos.

We would like to see a recognition that the rights of victims should be paramount, so we want consideration to be given to the introduction of an independent advocate, in line with the recommendations of the Victims’ Commissioner, to help victims of serious crime to navigate the range of services in the aftermath of a serious crime. With fewer than one in five violent crimes resulting in a charge, we will seek to legally entrench a victim’s right to a review of a decision by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service not to bring criminal charges or to discontinue a case. With homicide rates surging, Labour will also seek to provide national standards for the periodic review of homicide cases, because many families are deeply concerned at how cases can often be left to gather dust, with nobody brought to justice.

In the debate around serious violence, it is vital that the rights of victims are not forgotten. The aftermath of such an incident is traumatic and disorienting, with victims who are struggling to deal with their own personal trauma forced to navigate the at times baffling criminal justice system. As the number of victims of serious incidents is growing, now is the time to strengthen their rights.

I confirm again that we support the measures before us and will seek to be as constructive as possible in enhancing them. I hope that as deliberations on the Bill continue, we can have a full debate about adverse childhood experiences and the consequent policy considerations, such as trauma-informed policing and schooling, and about the implications of school exclusions and the increasing number of homeless children and children in care. As a result, I hope that we can improve on the measures in the Bill to begin to tackle the root causes of this growing epidemic. Violent crime is a contagious disease that is infecting communities across our nation. Without concerted political will and sustained Government investment, we will continue to see many more unnecessary tragedies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): This is a substantial Bill that has been published only relatively recently. After today’s debate, I shall continue to look into some of the points that have been raised with me about the Bill, as clearly some need further investigation, particularly those in relation to guns, as we have heard from some of my hon. Friends.

There is clearly a problem with violent crime, knife crime and the horrific acid attacks that we have all heard about. There are many things that I would like to see us do to curb those terrible crimes. The shadow Minister knows that I totally agree with her about police numbers. That would be a good place to start. We could also stop releasing prisoners automatically halfway through their sentences, and then giving them scandalous 28-day fixed-term recalls when they reoffend. We could stop flogging around and interfering with the police on stop and search and let the police get on with their job. We could also ensure that much tougher sentences are handed down by our courts in the first place to persistent and serious offenders.

This Bill is clearly the Government’s attempt to do something. I just hope, as I do with all Bills, that there are no unintended consequences. One thing that strikes me as a possible example of that is the intention to prevent online and remote retailers being able to deliver knives to residential premises. That means that people will have to pick up knives themselves, and in an age of increased internet shopping, this will reverse that trend, forcing the general public to collect their own knives and somehow get them home. I sincerely hope that ordinary, decent, law-abiding people do not get caught up in any possession charges for, for example, forgetting to remove the knife for a few days after purchase, and finding that they have no legal, lawful authority to be in possession of the blade.

The present situation is that if the knife is being delivered, it goes from the shop or warehouse straight to someone’s home, so this is currently not an issue in these circumstances. Conversely, it also seems to me to be a very handy possible excuse for someone caught in possession of a blade: a person just needs to buy a knife every day, and if they ever get stopped they can say that they have just bought it, as they could not buy it online, and then, presumably, they have a legal defence for carrying it.

Knives are very difficult to control, because they are everywhere. How many knives are in each and every household? That will not change. Knives will always be very accessible indeed. There is not really any need for anyone under the age of 18 to buy an average knife, as they will already easily be able to get hold of one if they so wish. What we can and must do is crack down on those who think that it is a good idea to carry them around with a view to using them in an attack, or
defending themselves from an attack. On this point, I have some rare praise for the knife crime sentencing guidelines, which, as I understand it, have been amended recently and will increase the starting point for possession of a blade to about six months’ custody.

Bearing that in mind, the sentences proposed in the Bill for actions that are currently perfectly legal—in relation to traders for non-compliance after this Bill becomes law—also range up to 51 weeks. Although I appreciate that that is a maximum, I am not sure that these offences are in anything like the same league. Perhaps more pertinently, we were told, just the other day when we were discussing the sentences for those who attack emergency service workers, that it was right that the maximum should be set at a year. Therefore, giving 51 weeks to a trader for posting a knife to a residential address and also to someone for attacking an emergency service worker does not necessarily sit well with me.

Let me turn now to threatening offences with knives and offensive weapons. I should say in passing that the House should realise that, in terms of sentencing on knives, 40% of knife possession offences attracted a prison sentence—therefore 60% did not—and 62% of offences of threatening with a knife resulted in custody. Again, many offences of threatening someone with a knife—38%—do not result in a custodial sentence. In 2016, somebody with 14 previous knife offences was still not sent to prison for committing a further knife offence.

Lyn Brown: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I know that he will hear me when I tell him that, in my constituency and in other similar constituencies, some young people carry, unfortunately, because they are afraid. Simply brandishing a knife does not necessarily mean that that person wants to use it, or that they are anything other than terrified by the situation in which they find themselves. I am pleased that our courts are showing some discretion. I urge him to consider carefully where he is going with this.

Philip Davies: Where I am going is to make this point: somebody who had 14 previous knife offences and who was then convicted of another knife offence should be sent to prison. The hon. Lady might not agree with that—that is her prerogative—but she will find herself in a minority on that particular view.

I hope the Minister will listen carefully to my next point. Serious offences with knives and offensive weapons, not necessarily trading offensive weapons, should come within the unduly lenient sentence scheme. Perhaps that is something that could be addressed in this Bill. I also wish to support an extension of the principle that committing a subsequent similar offence means a mandatory sentence. I would like to see a sentencing escalator, which means that every time a person is recommitted for the same offence they get a higher sentence than they received the previous time.

Andrew Rosindell: Very quickly, I wholeheartedly endorse everything that my hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree that there must be a deterrent? If there is no deterrent, the crimes will carry on being committed and there will be no end to this. The punishment must fit the crime, and people must be deterred from committing these acts of violence.

Philip Davies: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

Mr John Hayes rose.

Philip Davies: I will give way briefly to my right hon. Friend and then I will make some progress because I know that other people wish to speak.

Mr Hayes: In the same spirit as my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), I say that the key thing is that the criminal justice system must be retributive. This is not about treating people who are sick, but about punishing people who are guilty. Until we send out that signal from this place, the general public will believe, with cause, that we do not understand what they know to be happening in their communities.

Philip Davies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We hear very little in this place about people being punished for committing crimes, but there is nothing wrong with it. Again, on these kinds of issue, this House is completely out of touch with the general public in their views on law and order, sentencing and the criminal justice system, but my right hon. Friend, as usual, is not.

I think that there is a quite an important drafting mistake in the Bill, and the House of Commons Library seems to agree with me. Clause 26 amends the two Acts dealing with the offence of threatening with a knife and changes the test regarding the level of physical harm likely to result from the knife. I welcome that. I certainly welcome the thrust of what this clause seeks to do. As the clause is worded, it will still leave in law the definition of violence as being the original higher test. This is what the Library says on this point, and hopefully the Minister will take note of it.

“Section 139AA (4) and section 1A (2) both define the term ‘serious physical harm’, which forms part of the current wording of the offences set out in section 139AA and section 1A. However, the term ‘serious physical harm’ is not used in the proposed new wording for the offence as set out in clause 26, and would instead be replaced by the term ‘physical harm’. Clause 26 does not set out any particular definition for the term ‘physical harm’, nor does it amend or remove the existing definition of ‘serious physical harm’ in sections 139AA (4) and section 1A (2)."

I do not know what the Government’s intention is here. If they want to define the new term ‘physical harm’, the existing wording in sections 1139AA (4) and 1A (2) would need to be amended to set out a suitable definition. If they want to leave the new term undefined for the courts to interpret, the existing wording in those measures that I mentioned should be removed altogether.

I hope that the Minister will go away and look at this, because I think that there has been a genuine mistake. I think I know what the Government are trying to do, and they have half done it, but they have not squared the circle.

I want to see a rare outbreak of common sense with regard to criminal justice legislation. Clause 27 will extend the “threatening with a knife” offence to further educational establishments. Although that is a welcome step, it does not go nearly far enough as far as I am concerned. I will be tabling amendments to replace this clause to make it an offence to threaten somebody with a knife anywhere.
I cannot for the life of me see why someone who threatens somebody with a knife should not be prosecuted for this offence, regardless of where the offence takes place. Currently, it has to be in a public place or on school premises, and the Bill will extend that to further education premises. But why should it not apply to all premises? Why is threatening somebody with a knife an offence only if it is in a public place, school premises or a further education establishment? Threatening somebody with a knife should be an offence wherever it happens—surely that is common sense—but the law is not being extended in that way.

I am afraid that I am firmly of the belief that the Ministry of Justice has needlessly tied itself in knots over this issue for years. When the offence of threatening with a knife was introduced, it included a defence of lawful possession of the knife. This was clearly ludicrous and would have seriously affected convictions. Would anyone at the Ministry of Justice listen? No. How can the possession of a knife be a defence for threatening somebody with that knife? But the Ministry of Justice would not listen. I am not a lawyer—I say that with some pride—even with a House full of legal eagles, the Bill would have gone through with this glaring drafting error, which seems to have arisen because the legislation on possession of a knife has simply been copied and pasted, with the “threatening” bit added instead. Clearly, lawfully carrying the knife is a defence in the case of possession, but it should never have been a defence for threatening with that knife.

In desperation, I went to see the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. It was only when he agreed, weighed in and overruled the Ministry of Justice that the Bill was substantially changed before it was too late. People can check the record; it is absolutely true. That is why I have a very keen interest in this particular area of legislation.

The other glaring omission, which is quite possibly a throwback to the same original bad drafting, is that the offence is not committed in private premises. Possessing a knife in the home is clearly perfectly fine and legal—naturally. But why should it not be an offence to threaten with a knife in a domestic context? In a written question last November, I asked the then Secretary of State for the Home Department

“if she will extend the offence of threatening with a knife to incidents taking place on private property.”

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is in her place today, responded:

“It is already an offence to threaten someone with a knife whether in public or on private property.”

Well, if we read this provision literally, it clearly is not.

I followed up with a letter. As the Government seemed to think that that was already an offence, I hoped that when they realised that it was not, they would be keen to make it one. Alas, it was not so simple. The latest line seems to be to say that there are other offences that can be charged. Well, I know that. Thanks to the Public Order Act 1986 there are actually more offences that can be charged with threatening with a knife, but they could not be charged because it did not happen in a public place. The alternative charges to which we are referred do not attract the same sentence as threatening with a knife, and therefore do not reflect the seriousness of the offence.

Just one example was of a man in a hostel who threatened a female member of staff with a knife and had to be dealt with by an armed response unit. That must have been particularly terrifying, given that the member of staff concerned knew only too well of the man’s previous violent record, as the hostel was housing him on release from a prison sentence for violence. As the hostel was not a public place or a school, the offence of threatening with a knife could not be used by the Crown Prosecution Service. I understand that this was specifically confirmed by the prosecutor when the case came to court. An offence with a six-month maximum penalty was substituted and, with the man’s guilty plea, the maximum sentence available to the court was four months. This would have been avoided if the law had applied to all places equally, as it quite clearly should.

I really hope that I will get some cross-party support for this amendment so that we can make a positive change to the Bill. I am not, perhaps, always known as someone who unites the House—at least, not with me, but sometimes against me—but on this occasion there is not actually a great deal for people to disagree about. There may be some resistance from civil servants, who do not like any ideas other than the ones that they have come up with themselves, but I would like to hear, in the real world, just one good argument for not taking this opportunity to change the Bill in this small way, but in a way that would make the law much better and safer for many of our constituents.

Threatening somebody with a knife is a serious offence that we should crack down on. It should not make any difference where the act of threatening with a knife takes place, so I hope that my amendment will be accepted in due course.

The Minister and I have spoken. I very much appreciate the time that she has spent with me on this issue, but I would welcome a commitment on the Floor of the House that she will look seriously at this again. I hope that she will think twice before peddling a civil service standard reply, which I am sure that she would never do, but which I am sure the civil servants would always encourage her to do. She must look at this matter herself. If she does, I am sure that she will see that this is a very sensible amendment, which would make a big difference to the Bill.

3.5 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, let me welcome the Bill. We certainly support the broad principles behind it and fully support its Second Reading. The Bill will help to reduce the possession and use of weapons, including corrosive substances, so we look forward to engaging with the Secretary of State and his team as it progresses through the House. As is evident from the Bill, there has already been extensive and constructive engagement between
the Government here and the Scottish Government, reflecting the fact that these issues are a mixture of devolved and reserved matters.

The dramatic rise in crimes related to noxious or corrosive substances is appalling, with 454 occurring in London alone during 2016. But while London is currently the epicentre of this horrendous new form of crime, gruesome incidents involving the use of such substances have ruined lives right across the UK, including through an attack in my constituency that left three men with life-changing burns. It is extraordinary to think that the UK now has one of the highest rates of acid attacks in the world, and a distinct feature of the issue in the UK seems to be its close connection to gang culture.

We welcome moves to clamp down on how these substances are obtained and used, especially the ban on sales to under-18s of the most concentrated and dangerous corrosive substances, and restrictions on how such substances can be delivered. We particularly welcome the offence of possession in a public place, given concerns that corrosive substances may become more widely used in attacks because they represent a so-called “safe” weapon to carry for those who are looking to commit a violent crime, as opposed to carrying a weapon that already attracts a custodial sentence.

When we debated corrosive substances in Westminster Hall in December last year, I welcomed the interim measures that the Government had implemented while their consultation was under way. During that debate, we also explored the options open to the Government on how best to tackle corrosive substances. As well as the measures that the Government have outlined in the Bill, other possibilities included identifying the most harmful corrosive substances that are currently only considered reportable under the Poisons Act 1972 and reclassifying them as regulated substances. That would mean that members of the public would require a licence to purchase some substances. Assuming that the Bill receives its Second Reading, it would be worth returning to that issue in Committee so that we can explore what role that alternative scheme might still have.

There are other detailed issues that we want to explore, such as whether the Bill properly covers all situations that we would want it to, including the supply of substances that does not involve payment. The Bill currently seems focused on the sale of substances, so I am not sure whether the offence would cover cases in which there is no financial consideration. None the less, the Bill’s broad thrust is certainly welcome.

We also welcome the broad thrust of the changes that are being introduced in relation to knives. Members do not need me to rehearse the tragic consequences that knife crimes are all too often inflicting on our citizens. We particularly welcome moves to put in place further safeguards regarding the purchase of knives remotely so that existing laws against sales to young people can no longer be circumvented. The requirement for adequate age verification checks for online sales could be particularly important. Indeed, the then Justice Secretary in Scotland wrote to the UK Government back in January 2017 to raise concerns about the online sale of knives and the need for a joined-up approach, and that is what is happening through the Bill.

As the Secretary of State said, it is already an offence to sell knives to anyone under the age of 18, including online. The maximum penalty in Scotland for possession of a knife was increased in March 2016 from four years’ imprisonment to five years’ imprisonment. People who are convicted of a crime of violence in Scottish courts are now more likely to receive a custodial sentence than they were 10 years ago. The average length of custodial sentences imposed for knife crimes has more than doubled over the last decade. Ultimately, though, we cannot arrest and imprison our way out of these problems.

The Secretary of State explained some of the new work that the UK Government are undertaking to prevent knife crime and to stop people carrying knives in the first place. We welcome any emphasis on prevention. As the shadow Minister said, evidence-based investment in violence reduction programmes, especially for young people, has long been a key focus for the Scottish Government. They include the No Knives, Better Lives youth engagement programme, the national violence reduction unit, the Mentors in Violence Prevention programme, and the use of community-based officers who engage with and support students and staff in schools as part of the community policing service. That work has thankfully seen the number of young people under 18 in Scotland who are convicted of handling an offensive weapon fall from 430 in 2007-08 all the way down to 91 in 2016-17. But every young person carrying a knife, and every person who is a victim of a knife crime, is one too many; that is why we will support and engage constructively with this Bill.

On firearms, I have listened with interest to the reasoning behind the Government’s proposals to extend the ban on certain firearms and firearms accessories. I am sympathetic to what they say, but we will reserve final judgment until we hear evidence in Committee.

The final word must be with the victims, as ultimately they are who the Bill is all about. Every MP will have known constituents who have been affected by the tragedy of corrosive substance crimes or knife crimes. Clearly, we all want to do everything we can so that the number of victims becomes as close to zero as we can get. Prevention is the best response and it must be our priority. Making it more difficult to obtain these substances and weapons is an important part of that, and we are therefore happy to give our support to the Bill.

3.11 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I rise to support the Bill and its proposed legislative changes. I shall focus particularly on knife crime and preventive measures, notwithstanding the concerns raised by colleagues about the possible unintended consequences of some of the firearms measures. I am particularly pleased that action is being taken on zombie knives and corrosive substances. I pay tribute to the work of the Express & Star newspaper in the west midlands, which has been relentless in its campaign for action on knife crime, and particularly on zombie knives.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I am also especially pleased about the Government’s proposals in clause 26 which, as he outlined, change the definition of what we mean by the threat posed by somebody with an offensive weapon. I proposed such a measure at Prime Minister’s questions almost five years ago following the killing of a schoolgirl on the No. 9 bus coming out of Birmingham to a school in my constituency. In principle, tightening up that definition, notwithstanding some of the concerns that my hon.
Friend raised about the wording of the clause, is a significant change that will help to ensure that people are properly sentenced for threatening behaviour while using offensive weapons like knives. I very much welcome the insertion of clause 26 and the changes that that makes to the Prevention of Crime Act 1953.

The Bill has emerged out of the Government’s serious violence strategy, which was published in April. That is a very interesting document, because it sets out that the Government are clear that the violent crime that we see in certain parts of our communities will not be solved just by law enforcement. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, I am an advocate of tough sentencing and people being punished for their crimes. However, I think all Members would agree that that will not solve the underlying problems in some of our communities. That approach is necessary, but it is not sufficient to deal with this problem.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is exactly right. As I said earlier, the drivers—the causes—of crime are complex, as he suggests, but the way in which we deal with and respond to crime is not incompatible with taking the kind of lines that he has recommended. Both need to be addressed—the causes and the response.

James Morris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I totally agree—those things are not incompatible.

What we are seeing in some of our communities is not confined just to London. My constituency is just on the fringe of Birmingham, and we have seen examples of the increasing use of offensive weapons in Birmingham and other areas throughout the country. We need to be careful about exaggerating the problem. The issue has certainly arisen, but we must not exaggerate its consequences. However, we must ask some difficult questions about what leads young people, in particular, towards gangs, and what I would call the fetishisation of weapons. What is leading to that, and to this outbreak of serious violent crime, in certain parts of our communities? The Government’s serious violence strategy is quite clear that one of the drivers is drugs. It says, in particular, that increases in the dealing of crack cocaine and its supply chains are leading to gang violence. We need to be serious about addressing some of the issues of organised drug crime.

The reason why young people are turning to weapons and violence is a complex picture, and we need to face up to that complexity, notwithstanding the need for stronger sentencing. We need to look at issues around unstable family backgrounds. A lot of the kids who end up being part of gangs come from extremely unstable backgrounds.

Lyn Brown: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but may I warn him about the idea that unstable family backgrounds are what leads to young people being groomed? I know of a police officer who is one of two parents and has a problem with his child being groomed and taken into the county lines orbit. I really do not want parents to believe that their children will be safe because they have two parents and even go to a Catholic church on a Sunday afternoon. That does not make them safe. It does not mean that they will not be involved in gang culture at some point in the future.

James Morris: I accept what the hon. Lady says up to a point, although all the evidence, including the strong evidence that we see in the Government’s serious violence strategy, is that a lot of the kids—girls and boys—who end up in the sorts of situations that may lead to serious violence have come from family situations in which they have been considerably traumatised, and trauma of that nature has led to various other consequences. We cannot shy away from that.

Vicky Ford: When I was involved in a Select Committee inquiry into online issues, we were given evidence that the online recruitment of children from quite stable backgrounds is now being used to bring such children into gangs. We need to realise that no child is immune.

James Morris: I will come on to the point about social media. I am emphasising the point about kids who come from traumatised backgrounds because we need to examine what that leads to and what its drivers are. Often it leads to such things as social exclusion, school exclusion, and a cycle of behaviour that leads to violence. This is about young people not having a stable sense of structure in civilised society, as we would call it, with their values, their sense of structure and the way in which they think about the world being derived from the gang, which is where the violence and fetishisation of violence comes from.

Eddie Hughes: I do not want us to get stuck on this part of the debate—my hon. Friend is obviously keen to move on—but it is important. My understanding of data from Brent Council is that a typical gang member is 24 years old and was arrested for the first time at 14. Given that profile, it is likely that they will have had a troubled childhood, leading to a troubled adolescence.

James Morris: My hon. Friend is right. The evidence—again, this is from the Government’s serious violence strategy—is that 40% of gang members have been identified with a severe behavioural problem by the age of 12. That significant number allows us to understand how we might address some of the underlying behaviours that lead to violence and the targeted approaches that are necessary to deal with that.

As Members will know, I have been a long-term campaigner for improving mental health care in this country. The Government have made significant progress on improving mental health care for children and adolescents, but we need to do more, specifically by focusing on this cohort of vulnerable children, especially those who have faced trauma and come from looked-after backgrounds.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend mentions vulnerable children. In so many cases, they are 12, 13 or 14 years old. Does he think the answer is to label them criminals or actually to see them for the victims they are? If we do not criminalise them, they will have life chances that do not lead to just a continuation of criminality.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is a balance to be struck. As I said at the beginning of my speech, we need a very tough law enforcement
framework in this area. The evidence from the police is that they want that, because it provides a deterrent. However, he is exactly right that the balancing item in the argument as expressed by my right hon. Friend, the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), is that we need to understand the underlying drivers. That is why, as the Government recognise in their strategy, we need to focus on prevention and diversion strategies that take young people away from the criminal justice system. One weakness of the criminal justice system, for historical reasons, is that it can lead to a self-reinforcing cycle whereby young people get trapped in the system and cannot escape it.

Mr John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for giving way a second time. This dilemma has bedevilled youth justice in particular since the 1960s. The Children and Young Persons Act 1969 which, broadly speaking, took a treatmentist approach to juvenile criminals, led to all kinds of favourable treatment for them, with intermediate treatment orders being the classic example. That essentially meant that victims were devalued in the system, and we emphasised the individual criminal, rather than the event—the crime. The victim of a violent crime is more interested in what has been done to them than who has done it.

James Morris: My right hon. Friend. I am, makes some fair points, but we have to get the balance right in our approach because, as he will recognise, there are a lot of complex drivers.

I am conscious that other Members want to speak and I have taken a number of interventions, so I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. I support the measures in the Bill to tighten up the law enforcement regime for offensive weapons. However, we must reflect on the Government’s significant violence strategy, which recognises the only way we will solve this problem is by taking a multifaceted approach. Law enforcement, in and of itself, is not going to solve the problem. Too many young people are dying in this country, and that is a waste of potential and human life. We have to take the right measures to get to the bottom of why this is happening, and do it soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): [The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

3.25 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Today I am going to address the corrosive substances provisions of the Bill and welcome the progress that has been made. Had I realised the direction that the debate was going to take, I would have sought to speak for longer and to discuss the wider concerns that have been raised today. I have been seeking a Westminster Hall debate on those wider issues, and if any other Members wanted to join me in trying to secure a debate in the dying days of this term, I would be delighted.

Last year, there were 85 attacks using corrosive substances in Newham and 468 in the whole of London. In the five years since the start of 2012, the number of acid attacks in London has increased by some 600%, and my constituency is something of a hotspot. This time last year, the fear in my constituency about acid attacks was palpable. I heard about constituents of all ages and backgrounds who were afraid to leave their homes because the perception was that these acid attacks were random. It was a crisis, and it needed a strong response from Government. I called for that, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and I am happy to see that many of the specific measures I called for are in the Bill.

Most importantly, the Bill takes a step forward in recognising that corrosives are just as dangerous as knives. They can do just as much harm physically and emotionally, so they should receive the same kind of legal and police response. The introduction of a clear and specific offence of possession of a corrosive substance in public should make the job of the police and the courts easier in catching and prosecuting those who carry acid as a weapon.

The ban on the sale of corrosive products to children is also very welcome. Although I accept the arguments for the age restriction of 18, I join colleagues in asking whether a higher age restriction might be appropriate. I also think that the Bill Committee should look closer at the broader issue of supply, and not just sale. Would it be better to introduce an offence of supplying a child with acid in an unsafe way, not just selling in exchange for money, which I suggested last year? It is important to get this right because some acid attacks, I am told, are revenge, punishments or even initiation rites for junior members of criminally run gangs. If an older man gives acid to a child and tells them to commit an offence or an attack, will the act of giving be covered by an offence in the Bill? Can we prosecute the man who has given the acid to the child as effectively as we would if he had taken money for it? Personally, I think that is a higher offence than those of unwitting sale or supply. I am happy to see that many of the specific measures I called for are in the Bill.

Over the past year, I have raised several concerns about online sales of corrosive products. At this time last year, people could buy 96%—I commend Action Against Acid—concentrated sulphuric acid in large bottles from Amazon for about five quid each, with no checks. There is still a requirement for online sellers, like all sellers, to monitor suspicious purchases under the Poisons Act 1972, but the Government have failed to convince me that they can implement or enforce this online, so I welcome the ban on home deliveries of corrosive products. I think that that will take us where we need to be. I hope that it will indirectly ban these sales, because if we cannot make online sales safe, they simply have to be stopped to protect communities.

This Bill is a step forward. It will help to ensure that sellers of these products have face-to-face contact with buyers and can ask them questions. There is really no other way that the law could work. It was always a bit of a joke to suggest that online sellers could monitor suspicious purchases, and I think we got that message across in our debate before Christmas. I hope this change will make suspicious transactions reporting more workable, but putting a greater emphasis on reporting by retailers only increases the need for proper guidance and for the Home Office to monitor and enforce the legal requirement. Retailers have to understand that there is a real chance that the Government...
will take action against them if they fail. In written questions, I have asked Home Office Ministers whether the Department has a programme of test purchases, but—bless them—I keep being given vague answers to my questions. I would like to hear about this issue from the Minister today, or if she wants, she could write to me about it.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. She has done a lot of campaigning on this issue, and I congratulate her on it. The point she is making is absolutely crucial to ensure that the legislation is absolutely effective. Trading standards departments in local authorities up and down the country have been the butt of quite a lot of cuts because councils can get away with it. Unless we support trading standards departments and officers, and back the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, we will not be able to detect such crimes. We will not have the scale of test purchasing that we need to make sure that retailers are acting responsibly.

Lyn Brown: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As so many others have gone out with the Bill, I suggest that the Government could at the same time look at the minimum wage legislation, because that would give my constituents an awful lot of help.

The Government could have taken a different approach to the Bill. In my speech before Christmas, I argued that several corrosive substances need to be brought under greater control, including ammonia, sodium hydroxide and hydrofluoric acid, as well as sulphuric acid. I am reassured that all those substances have been included in schedule 1 as corrosive products. The list in schedule 1 is new, and does not match the lists in parts 1 to 4 of schedule 1A to the Poisons Act. The Minister could use this Bill or a statutory instrument to move more poisons or chemicals into parts 1 or 2 of schedule 1A to the Poisons Act, meaning that they would require people to have an official licence and photo ID before purchase. That would prevent us having to rely so heavily on retail staff to spot suspicious purchases, and it would restrict these chemicals to the hands of trained professionals who, I presume, will use them safely.

Sulphuric acid has now been moved into part 1 of schedule 1A to the Poisons Act, as I and others have called for. It will require people to have a licence from the end of this week, which is very welcome. My question, however, for the Minister is: why was that decision made for sulphuric acid only, not for the other chemicals I have highlighted? Why not move hydrofluoric acid into part 2 as a regulated poison? It is highly dangerous: as I said in the debate before Christmas, exposure on just 2% of the skin can kill. Why not move ammonia into part 2 as well, given that ammonia was found at 20 out of 28 crime scenes tested by the Met? Perhaps the Department has better evidence about which chemicals are being used in crimes or about those that pose a risk, but if so, I would argue that such a case needs to be made, and made transparently, during the passage of the Bill. That only leaves me to welcome the progress that this Bill represents, although I hope the Minister will agree with me that there are still some serious issues to be addressed.
On that basis, I think Ministers are doing the right thing, although I accept that it might well disadvantage some disabled people. We have to find other ways of helping those groups, perhaps by adapting rifles or the places where these people shoot.

I am chairman of the all-party group on shooting and conservation, and I work closely with all the professional shooting bodies, including the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Countryside Alliance and the British Shooting Sports Council. They have made lots of very professional representations to the Minister on this subject. I have also been working closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who represents the BSSC but could not be here for our debate because, unfortunately, he has had to attend a family funeral today. We are seeking to persuade the Minister to consider modifying the proposals.

In clause 28(2), the Government propose to ban all weapons that have a muzzle energy greater than 13,600 joules. The Bill would put them into section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968—in other words, it would make them a prohibited weapon. There are about 200 of those weapons—a small number—and just over 200 people, probably, have a licence to use them. I will discuss where the weapons should be stored, but I want to give the House a sense of the sort of people who are disadvantaged. As I have already said, and as I stress again to the Minister, these are some of the most law-abiding people in the country.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Government’s latest impact assessment for the Bill suggests that the measure could cost them up to £6 million—not only in compensation for loss of weapons, but through the loss of revenue at Government Ministry of Defence rifle ranges?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend uses the phrase “weapon of choice” among criminals. Is it not an irony that the criminals’ weapons of choice are already banned and are held illegally?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend makes a really potent and timely point; I was about to demonstrate why these weapons have never been implicated in any crime.

Simon Hoare: A moment ago, my hon. Friend said he did not want to be caricatured, and that is absolutely right. It is important for everybody to understand that this is not a rampant, American, NRA-type debate, but one based on evidence, fact, practical experience and trying to make good law.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend means mental health conditions, not medical conditions. Does he agree that, happily, because of our stringent licensing system, evil terrorists are not committing crimes using legally held guns?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has pulled me up: words are important in this place. What I meant to say was medical conditions which might include a mental health condition—but there are medical conditions that might mean that someone was not granted a shotgun or firearms certificate.

I want to move on to the .50 calibre weapons themselves, and why they are not likely to be used in a crime—and never have been, as far as we know.

Simon Hoare: In fact, the Fifty Calibre Shooters Association...which is dedicated to target shooting with this calibre has its origins in the early 1980s in the USA and has over 2,500 members internationally. It is affiliated with .50 calibre target rifle shooting groups in Australia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and, in addition to regular competitions, hosts the annual World Championship in which UK FCSA target shooters compete. The UK FCSA is a Home Office Approved Club, has existed as a well-respected target shooting club since 1991 and has grown to a membership of over 400.”

These are the sorts of people whom we are disadvantaging. As I have already said, and as I stress again to the Minister, these are some of the most law-abiding people in the country.
dangerous. I have to tell the House that any rifle is dangerous in the wrong hands and used in the wrong way. A .22, the very smallest rifle, is lethal at over a mile if it is fired straight at somebody. All rifles need to be handled with great care and held in very secure conditions.

In summing up, the Government will, I think, cite some evidence as to why these rifles need to be banned. They will cite the one that was stolen and chucked over the hedge with the barrel chopped off, they will cite the fact that one was used in the troubles in Northern Ireland, and they will cite the fact that more high-powered weapons are being seized by customs at our borders. But this has nothing to do with .5 calibre weapons. It has everything to do with illegal weapons, the sort of weapons of choice that, sadly, the criminal and the terrorist will use, but not these particular weapons.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not agree that the three examples he cites are actually applicable to pretty much any weapon, and that, if we concede on that point, perfectly legitimate rifles and shotguns would be at risk of being removed from society all together?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is precisely the point I am making. This whole thing would set a precedent: .5 weapons today, then .60—where do we go next? Just because people think they might get into the wrong hands and be used by the wrong people. That is the wrong way to govern. We should not prohibit things unless there is really good evidence for doing so.

I have been having discussions with Ministers. I have said that instead of banning these weapons, as there are so few of them and they are able to be fired legally at so few ranges by so few people, why not toughen up the rules on storage to make it absolutely impossible for them ever to be stolen? If they had to be stored in an armoury, at a gun club by arrangement with the police or in a military storage by arrangement with the military, storage would have to be approved by the police. There could be alarms and CCTV in the storage and weapons would not be licensed unless the police approved places of secure storage. That would be a much more effective and useful way of going forward if we want to stop weapons falling into the wrong hands, and would make it much safer for us all.

Chris Davies (Brecon andRadnorshire)(Con): I agree with my hon. Friend 100% on the point he is making. One of the ranges used is in my constituency. In a bizarre way, I would say that when the club is shooting there it is one of the safest places to be, because people are trained and know what they are doing. We should be looking at the security and storage element, not banning these weapons.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look at this again. The proposals in the Bill are disportionate. They are unworkable, because they are very easy to get around. They target some of the most law-abiding people in the country and they will not make this country any safer, because the criminal will use a different weapon of choice.
Act of Parliament, so I wonder why it has been done in that way and whether it ought to be done in regulations instead.

Clause 5 bans having corrosive substances—not corrosive products—in a public place and it tells us that a corrosive substance is a substance capable of harming human skin by corrosion. I presume that means that it covers substances not on the list in schedule 1. It seems a bit odd to have two different definitions of "corrosive substance" in two different parts of the Bill, one in schedule 1 and one defined as causing corrosive harm to human skin. Clause 5 does not refer to schedule 1. Does the Minister expect the police in practice to use schedule 1 to work out which products are covered by clause 5, or does she expect them to come up with a different list? It seems a little untidy to have two definitions.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and others, I think it would be better to ban sales to under-21s, rather than under-18s. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley rightly suggested that the current restrictions, which the Bills extends, on knives in schools and further education colleges ought to apply to corrosive substances. What we already do for knives should apply as well to acid. I would hope that that extension could be made.

Acid Survivors Trust International has rightly made the case that more needs to be done to address the impact of acid attacks, which, as we all recognise, can be horrifying. The number of attacks in London nearly trebled between 2014 and 2017. I tabled a series of parliamentary questions last month to try to understand the economic impact of acid attacks—the cost to the police, the cost to the health service and the cost of imprisoning people who carry them out—and all received the answer: Ministers do not know what the impacts are. The Home Office does not collect national statistics on acid attacks. I think it should. We ought to make that addition to the statistics collected. In April, the Department asked the National Police Chiefs' Council to undertake a data-collection exercise on acid attacks.

Will the Minister tell us what came out of that exercise and whether she will consider adding these figures to the answer: Ministers do not know what the impacts are. The Home Office does not collect national statistics on acid attacks. I think it should. We ought to make that addition to the statistics collected. In April, the Department asked the National Police Chiefs' Council to undertake a data-collection exercise on acid attacks.

As a London MP, I welcome the Bill as a vital tool in the fight against the kinds of violent crime that are sadly increasing across the capital. While overall crime continues to fall, knife crime, gun crime and homicide are unfortunately on the rise, and we are seeing lives torn apart by utterly senseless violence, as the age profile of both victims and perpetrators shifts lower. Although some of that increase can be attributed to improvements in police recording, changes in the illegal drugs trade seem to be driving the other part of the trend. Criminal gangs have been adapting their business model to exploit previously untapped markets beyond inner London, using vulnerable young people as distributors, and upping their violence and intimidation to break into new territory. Meanwhile, there was a record number of acid attacks in London last year. I therefore welcome the fact that the Bill bans the sale of the most dangerous corrosive products to under-18s, and criminalises the possession of corrosive substances in a public place.

As the fear of crime rises in tandem with those trends, too many young people are choosing to arm themselves, which is why the Bill introduces tough new restrictions on the online sales of knives. It will also become illegal to possess certain offensive weapons in private, including zombie knives and knuckle-dusters. To assist prosecutions, clause 26 amends the legal test regarding threats made with an illegal weapon.

As many Members have pointed out, the Bill is not a panacea, and the Government recognise that. Legislation and policing must be complemented by cross-agency working that involves schools, social services and communities. Such a partnership lies at the heart of the Government’s serious violence strategy, whereby Home Office funding will knit together a cohesive, cross-departmental approach to violent crime. I hope that that approach will include consideration of the worrying rise in school exclusions. Criminals are feeding on vulnerable young people who are falling out of the system. With the number of secondary permanent exclusions climbing for the fourth consecutive year, too many students are being taught in pupil referral units. We need new core schools to sit between mainstream schools and those units, working hand in glove with social services to support vulnerable pupils.

I am also concerned about the fact that local authorities are overstretched owing to outdated assumptions about need. My borough of Havering is dealing with the fastest-growing number of children of any London authority. In fulfilling statutory duties towards vulnerable youngsters, the council is left with little cash proactively...
to address other problems affecting that group and their families, such as addiction. Meanwhile, the pressures on social workers are leading to additional demand on police. One of my local officers says that he is now being called more regularly to tackle matters that are best handled by trained social workers.

The Mayor of London’s first reaction to rising violence on his watch seems always to be to blame the Government for his funding settlement, but money cannot be a substitute for strategy. The Mayor must turn urgently to a review of performance, operations and tactics, and the building of better collaborative partnerships across London to mimic the success of our mayoral team in halving teen knife deaths between 2008 and 2011 at a time of budgetary constraint. None the less, I am not so naive as to discount resourcing as a problem. More time of budgetary constraint. None the less, I am not so naive as to discount resourcing as a problem. More money has been provided by the Home Office for counter-terrorism duties, and the Mayor is now able to increase his precept substantially. There are more efficiencies to be found from the new technologies that are finally being deployed. The Government must, however, acknowledge that the demand on police in London is increasing rapidly.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): As my hon. Friend rightly notes, resourcing is an issue, but it is equally important to ensure that we get enough bang for our buck. In that context, does she agree that putting more police officers on bikes, which enables them to be visible but also to cover a great deal of ground—particularly in a constituency that is flat, such as Cheltenham—is basically a good idea?

**Julia Lopez**: That does indeed sound like, basically, a good idea. I think everyone agrees that police visibility is vital to maintaining the trust of the community, and to the sharing of intelligence.

The variety of issues that the police are being asked to tackle is becoming ever broader, and rapid demographic and technological changes are spreading the challenges across more boroughs. To put it simply, we need more resources, whether that means officers on the ground or analysts who can track and understand trends. My policing team has said that one of the big problems across the Met is the reduction in the number of analysts across more boroughs. To put it simply, we need more resources, whether that means officers on the ground or analysts who can track and understand trends. My policing team has said that one of the big problems across the Met is the reduction in the number of analysts at Scotland Yard who can spot where crimes are happening and deploy resources accordingly.

We must also give officers the confidence that they will be backed in using the powers available to them. I have raised these issues at a high level within Government and encourage the Met and Home Office together to take a firm grip and disrupt the criminal gang networks relentlessly. Recent media reports suggest that the takeover of the crack cocaine market by Albanian mafia is partly responsible for a new wave of violence, so how are we working with authorities in Albania and other countries to ensure the swift deportation of violent criminals from these shores?

On a parochial level, I am concerned that the Mayor’s policing assumptions are not keeping up with the change under way in London’s suburbs. It is not surprising that the fear of crime in my constituency is high, even if violent crime levels are comparatively low. In neighbouring Romford, where many teenagers from my constituency shop and socialise, we saw at the weekend the needless stabbing to death of a 15-year-old schoolboy, and knives have recently been wielded openly in the local shopping centre.

The trust of a community in the responsiveness of police is vital to ensuring local intelligence is shared and crime kept low. That trust is being lost due to problems in reporting, particularly through the 101 service. The initial problems in police response times following the Mayor’s tri-borough policing restructure seemed to have been resolved, but the community distrust was then compounded by the planned closure of Hornchurch police station.

Without that physical presence, residents are understandably concerned that town centres in my constituency will be neglected so as to tackle the growing problems in Romford, Barking, East Ham and elsewhere. In the meantime, our borough is attempting to purchase the police station from the Mayor and provide community space for police elsewhere, and the Mayor ought to be encouraging more of this kind of community partnership work.

Finally, I offered to raise concerns put to me by constituents about the provisions in the Bill on rifles, as eloquently expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). One resident, a retired police officer and someone who represented our country in shooting, is concerned that the prohibition of certain firearms is a tokenistic response disproportionate to the risk. Other constituents advise that no legally owned rifle of the types this Bill prohibits has ever been used in criminal activity despite being used by target shooters for many decades. They are unconvinced by the Home Office’s evidential base for this move and feel therefore that this proposed legislation amounts to an abuse of process. I hope some of these issues will be ironed out in Committee.

Those concerns aside, however, I broadly welcome the Bill in providing us with another tool to tackle violent crime. But we must all be mindful not ever to see legislation as a cure-all. This urgent task requires the right laws, the right policing tactics, the right resource, the right punishment and the right partnership work to drive this scourge from our communities.

4.7 pm

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): I begin by thanking the Minister for crime, safeguarding and vulnerability for taking time out of a very busy diary to meet me recently to discuss the Bill in greater detail. The opportunity to raise some matters of specific concern to my constituents was much appreciated.

I, along with Plaid Cymru, welcome the Bill and support the Government’s desire to control the purchase and possession of offensive weapons by those who, frankly, have no legitimate reason to have them. The Minister will be aware, however, of some of my concerns, particularly about the unintended consequences this legislation might have for legitimate uses of some knives and firearms by responsible citizens, and I shall focus my remarks on those points.

Like the Minister, I represent a rural constituency in which many small businesses and tradesmen use knives to carry out their professions. Some of them have contacted me recently to express their concerns about the impact that these new restrictions, particularly on the online sale of some knives, might have on them.
In a rural constituency such as Ceredigion, it is often not practical, and certainly not always easy, for people to travel to a designated location to verify their identity, as opposed to receiving a delivery of tools at a home address, for example. This would pose specific difficulties for some smaller businesses as well.

It is important that, in combating knife crime, legislation targets specific blades and offenders, and that its impact on responsible users is mitigated as much as possible, be they woodsmen and farmers, Scout group leaders and outdoor educators, chefs or even those participating in historical re-enactments, all of whom have contacted me to express concerns. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister elaborated on how the Bill will mitigate the impact of these changes on responsible users, to provide reassurance that it will target the unjustifiable use of offensive blades, but still allow others to be used responsibly for justifiable work or leisure-related purposes.

I also want to echo some of the arguments made about the need to take a proportionate approach to changes to firearms regulations. It is appropriate that those who hold firearms certificates are rigorously assessed by the police and subjected to medical assessments, background checks and continuous monitoring. Firearms of any calibre and description are dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands. Concerns have already been expressed—I will not go into them again in too much detail—that some of the proposed changes, including those to muzzle velocity regulations, will unfairly impact legitimate law-abiding firearms holders such as target shooters without achieving greater public safety or reducing gun crime. Will the Minister reconsider those concerns in Committee and provide greater detail on the justification for those changes?

Alex Chalk: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has, like me, received representations from legitimate sportspersons saying that they would be open to considering further proposals such as additional storage security measures to allay any lingering concerns that may remain.

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have indeed received many representations from responsible sportsmen, and from target shooters in particular, who are very open to looking again at the conditions connected to the licensing arrangements, particularly with regard to the storage of firearms. It would be both proportionate and reasonable to pursue the matter further in Committee.

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. As well as being neighbours, we also share a police force. Does he agree that if the extra restrictions were put in, our police force, and indeed all the police forces around the country, would easily manage to ensure that they were enforced?

Ben Lake: I concur wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. I am aware that Dyfed-Powys police already enforce the licensing arrangements thoroughly. It would be a reasonable and logical step to add some additional requirements with regard to the security of storage, and I am sure that the police will be fully able to ensure that the law is complied with. It is incumbent on us to ensure that any changes to the regulations are effective in reducing gun crime while not punishing responsible firearms certificate holders unnecessarily. The aim must be to enhance public safety by reducing gun crime, so it is important that any assessments suggesting that such changes will realise that aim should be published in full detail for scrutiny.

I would like to conclude by referring to the horrific incidents we have seen all too often in recent years that have made the corrosive substances aspect of the Bill so vital. The rise in the number of instances in which acids or corrosive products have been weaponised is frankly frightening. The availability of those products has made them a weapon of choice for those of wicked intent, with devastating consequences. It saddens me that, in the 21st century, we find ourselves having to discuss ways to prevent such acts of barbarity and of stopping individuals using otherwise legitimate products to inflict devastating harm on others, but we are where we are. It is entirely appropriate—and indeed, incumbent on the Government—to legislate to try to prevent such hideous crimes from taking place.

I have asked for assurances from the Government on the proportionality of the proposed measures on knives and firearms, but let me be clear that I welcome their efforts to control the number of knives, firearms and corrosive substances on our streets. There is absolutely no reason for an individual to have a zombie knife, a flick-knife or a knuckleduster, or for them to carry acid on our streets. Those items have no purpose other than to inflict as much damage as possible, and I therefore welcome the Bill’s move to tighten the law in relation to their possession.

More must be done to tackle the root causes of such crimes, with greater support being given to those who feel the need to carry a weapon in the first place, and to tackle the decline in police numbers. Those matters are perhaps beyond the scope of the Bill, but we as legislators have a duty to consider them, and I hope that the Government will give the House that opportunity in the near future.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). I agree with him wholeheartedly that it is sad that we are debating these issues and that the Government have had to introduce the Bill. It should not be necessary—people should not throw acid in people’s faces, which has a life-changing impact, and they should not use knives on our streets.

However, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we are where we are. This is a hugely important Bill because the scourge of knife and acid crime touches not only a number of constituencies within London and our inner cities, but all our constituencies up and down the country. I am sorry to say that its intensity is growing outside the major cities, and it is finding its way into towns such as mine and rural communities. It devastates communities, including mine, where we have had horrific knife attacks. I agree that one victim of an acid or knife attack is one too many. The tragedy is that, in many cases, young people’s lives are taken at an early age when they have so much promise ahead of them, which devastates not only the families but the wider community.
We know that the victims and perpetrators of such offences are often from outside the towns in which those offences are committed. I have referenced one incident in the House previously. There were six knife attacks in Colchester in one evening, and in all six cases, the victims and perpetrators were from outside Colchester—they came from London. This is not just a city issue anymore. County lines are bought and sold like franchises. The perpetrators use children—they know that they are less likely to be stopped and searched on the train or other public transport—to carry drugs, bringing with them fear, intimidation and violence to towns up and down the country. As I said, in the case I mentioned, the victims and perpetrators were all from London. There is an increase in county lines activity and the barbaric activity known as cuckooing. Much of this is, sadly, drug-related.

I welcome the Government’s serious crime strategy and the £40 million that comes with it. I was pleased to speak in the debate just a few weeks ago about that very subject. I have my own views about what we need to do to tackle serious crime, and especially on prevention and diversion. The Government’s strategy includes a number of measures that I wholeheartedly support but, as the Minister knows, because we have had this conversation, the question is how we treat children who have been involved in county lines operations. In many cases we are talking about 12 to 15-year-olds who are groomed by drug gangs in a similar way to how sexual predators groom young people. It can start with the purchase of trainers or a financial gift of some description, or it can start with violence and intimidation of either the young person or a family member. Do we treat those children like criminals, bearing in mind their life chances from that moment on, or do we treat them like the victims they are, and put them back on the right track to a fulfilling life in which they contribute fully to society?

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that children’s criminal records should not haunt them for the rest of their lives and that our system should wipe the slate clean at a certain point?

Will Quince: I broadly agree with my right hon. Friend. When we criminalise a child at a young age, the problem is that their life chances are impaired to such an extent that a life continuing along the route of criminality is sadly almost inevitable. We should break that cycle when we have the opportunity to intervene—such opportunities are often rare—and ensure that we put them back on the right path. One way to do that is to ensure that a criminal record does not stay with a child forever. For example, someone might commit an offence at a young age after they have been groomed or forced into that action due to violence and intimidation. They could then completely turn their lives around and think, 10 years later, “I want to contribute by becoming a police officer and serving my community.” Currently—I stand to be corrected by the Minister—that would not be possible, because their criminal record continues. I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend.

I welcome the Bill and will support its Second Reading. It has huge merits but, as a number of right hon. and hon. Members have said, it is not without issue. By its nature, it is reactive legislation that deals with weapons that gangs and criminals have moved on to. Some of those weapons—knives and corrosives—can probably never truly be banned, as we all know that they are available in households across the country. I could probably find several in my kitchen. We need to ensure that we have a multifaceted approach to tackling this issue, and the serious violence strategy has a significant role to play.

First, we need to make sure that our legislation gives the police the powers they need to deal with offenders, which is one thing that the Bill does. Secondly, we need to make sure that, when we intervene, we do so as early as possible. We need to turn children away from gangs and, indeed, when they are the victims of gangs or grooming, we need to give them the protection and support they need.

As I have said previously in the Chamber, we need education in schools to ensure that children know the dangers of carrying a weapon. There are some fantastic charities across the country—many have been set up by parents who have lost a child to knife crime—that go into schools to educate children about the danger of carrying knives. The charities teach children that they are far more likely to be the victim of a knife attack if they carry a knife themselves, and they show them in a graphic way the devastation caused by a knife attack. They show the awful wounds, and they also show what it feels like to be a family member whose child is in hospital or, even worse, has been fatally wounded or murdered.

Thirdly, judges need a full range of sentencing powers so that a person who is repeatedly caught carrying a knife, or who is caught harming an individual, can be given a custodial sentence. I agree with Members who have said that we need to come down very hard on those who are repeatedly caught carrying a knife or weapon, and on those who harm another individual, but there need to be other solutions, such as educational and non-custodial approaches, so that we do not fill our prisons with young people who have lost their future.

At the moment, an individual who is caught carrying a knife may get just a caution. In my view, they should also be sent on a weapons awareness course. A person who is caught speeding, for example—I am not conflating carrying a knife and speeding but, to some extent, it is a useful comparison—has the option of paying a fine or going on a course. It should be mandatory that a person who is given a caution for any kind of weapon-related offence is sent on a course. They should have to see the devastation caused by such weapons, which hopefully would go some way towards breaking their attitude towards carrying a weapon and knife crime. That would not work for everyone, but for some individuals, especially those who are particularly young and have made a mistake—for many first-time offenders it will be just a mistake—it might just break the cycle, and at very small cost. Such courses are, in many cases, run by charities across the country.

Fourthly, we need to identify and address the root causes of this criminality. Why do people carry weapons? How has our society got to this position? It could be social breakdown, regional inequality, family breakdown, absent father figures or a lack of male role models. It could be school exclusion, which has been mentioned, or social isolation—gang culture can provide a sense of
belonging. It could be county line activity or prostitution. It could actually be education and the messaging we send out about drugs and drug use.

I find it bizarre that we have middle-class people in this country who drive around in their electric vehicles, drinking their Rainforest Alliance coffee and eating their Fairtrade chocolate, but who have no qualms whatsoever about going out at the weekend and having a few lines of coke, because that does not harm anyone, does it? If only those people saw the devastation that that causes both in the country where the cocaine is sourced from and through the county line activity in this country that takes the drugs from the point of entry to the point at which they are sold. If only they saw, in so many cases, the children whose lives have been devastated as a result. We need to send a clear message that drug taking is not acceptable and that, through the damage it does, it is not a victimless crime.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point that deserves amplification. The gated-lived, middle-class liberals who take drugs have little or no care because they have little or no contact with the kind of class liberals who take drugs have little or no care.

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. It is important to note, though, that although the reality is that it is now quite the opposite. These grooming gangs are looking for people who are not stereotypical. They are looking for children who are particularly vulnerable, and that is not just children from socially deprived backgrounds or from council housing estates—the people one would perhaps automatically associate with being easy prey for some of these grooming gangs—but the young people who are easiest to groom and are less likely to be stopped and searched by a police officer. The enemy is at the gate, and to think that our own children and the children of middle-class families are not as affected as anybody else is a myth. It is a dangerous assumption not to think that every single part of our society and every town in our country is affected, and even rural areas. We should absolutely send out the message loud and clear that this affects everybody’s children, not just somebody else’s.

On root causes, we need to take a much tougher stance on antisocial behaviour. If we do not take a tougher stance on very low-level crime, it will be easier for people to think that other crimes are acceptable. A policing focus on drugs would be particularly helpful. To tackle the issues, we really need to understand the root causes. The strategy goes some way towards achieving that, but there is more work to do.

Let me turn to the specifics of the Bill. There is no reason whatsoever for under-18s to be able to buy these weapons, nor for them to carry them in public, so I very much welcome the Government’s position. There is also no reason to possess certain weapons in private properties. There is no justification for having zombie knives, knuckle dusters and death stars, even in private possession.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Successive Governments have failed to tackle the knife culture in this country, so in a way this is not really a political thing.

We have had instances in Coventry, going back around 20-odd years, of people giving evidence in court and the individual being given a sentence, but then visiting them as a punishment. That is one part of the whole argument about witness protection schemes.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. There is no easy answer to this issue; if there was, successive Governments would have addressed it. That was why I was making the point that to really address knife crime and why people carry weapons, we need to understand the root causes and then put in place interventions at numerous points on the journey towards criminality. Even when someone has entered criminality, we should intervene at the earliest possible opportunity to try to break the cycle and turn someone’s life around.

On the online sale of weapons, I very much welcome the banning of the delivery of knives and corrosives brought online, and especially the fact that they will no longer be deliverable to residential addresses. I agree with the position in the Bill: there is no reason why such items cannot be purchased in person. The Bill goes some way to addressing the move towards online purchases, but I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Have we looked into age verification on delivery, which is an option that already exists for a number of products? I appreciate that there are some flaws with that approach, but I think there is something in it to be teased out in Committee. Have we assessed the possibility of individuals getting these weapons delivered to workplaces instead? So many people have even private parcels delivered to their workplaces, so we must ensure that there is no loophole for people to purchase corrosives or knives using that route.

On retailers, have we done any liaison with retailers on theft? If we are to make knives more difficult to come across—I refer back to what I said about these items being in most of our kitchens up and down the country—what work has been done on theft? I can walk into any Sainsbury’s or Tesco store—other supermarkets are, of course, available—and notice that in the kitchen aisle it is only the high-value knives that have any kind of security tag. Some of the very sharp, low-priced knives are just there on the shelves for anybody to pick up. I should also point out that they are not even always above the height that children can reach, which is perhaps another point that needs to be considered. I am not sure whether we need to go as far as having all knives behind a counter so we have to request one, as we do with cigarettes. Perhaps we should look at some kind of security tagging of knives, especially sharp knives. I do not know whether we have looked at having cabinets in shops. I am conscious that that is not the panacea; it will not fix the issue, but it might go some way towards making it harder for individuals to get hold of a knife.

As has been said by many hon. Members, constituents have raised firearms as an issue. Although I represent a wholly urban constituency, I have a number of people who are interested in firearms for sporting purposes. I have some sympathy with the Government’s view on the banning of .50 calibre rifles for civilian ownership. These are very high-powered rifles that can punch through armour. I know that they have been banned in California under Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Inevitably,
with any such policy, we must make sure that it is evidence based. I understand that there is a case of one of these weapons being stolen, but it was recovered very quickly by the police. We need to make sure that our policy is evidence based. We are talking about a very small number of these weapons. As far as I understand it, we do not have any evidence of these weapons having been used in crimes.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As for what the Government have tried to achieve, this Bill is, in every other respect, almost a perfect Bill. However, what they run the risk of doing with a ban on .50 calibre rifles is demonising people in the community who are incredibly law abiding. What we do not want to do is to fall into the trap, which we did with the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the handgun ban, of creating bad law when, actually, this we did with the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the people in the community who are incredibly law abiding. doing with a ban on .50 calibre rifles is demonising have tried to achieve, this Bill is, in every other respect, makes a very good point. As for what the Government scourge that is knife crime—or indeed any crime involving pragmatic and look at any and all measures in the serious crime strategy. I just hope that we can be evidence based.

Will Quince: I agree with my hon. Friend. I could understand it if there was a compelling case that these particular weapons had been used in extensive criminality, or indeed if there was a very strong evidence-based case against them because there was a threat that they would be used in some form of criminality. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) put it very well: there are a very small number of individuals who use these weapons. If the Government believe that there is case to do something, then absolutely, yes, let us do so. Let us look at the security of these firearms. Let us perhaps look, in extremis, at allowing them to be kept only at ranges, and secured with equipment that is not usually found domestically. However, there is concern among the sporting firearms fraternity that this might be the thin end of the wedge and that it would lead to further such bannings of weapons.

All I am saying to the Minister is: can we take a look at this matter in Committee to make sure that any approach that we take is indeed evidence based? That also goes for the case in relation to manually actuated release system rifles. I agree with the Government’s fundamental position that these are, in theory, dangerous weapons, but I also appreciate the views of those constituents who have contacted me who have a disability. One in particular has contacted me and said that this is the only weapon that he can fire, and the measure would mean that he could not partake in his sport. We need to consider whether we argue for an exemption, whether we tighten up the measures to ensure that these rifles are more secure than most other firearms have to be, or indeed whether they have to be kept at a registered range. I hope that the Minister will take that away and look at it, along with a number of points that have been made by colleagues, in Committee. Let me reiterate the point that any change that we make must absolutely be evidence based.

To conclude, this is a good Bill. Its intentions are indeed very good and sound, but there is work to do in Committee, and there is certainly further work to do on the serious crime strategy. I just hope that we can be pragmatic and look at any and all measures in the future that will go some way towards addressing the scourge that is knife crime—or indeed any crime involving weapons of this nature.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I broadly welcome this legislation to crack down on crimes involving knives, firearms and corrosives. Valid concerns have been raised in this debate, and I urge Ministers to think carefully about whether changes can be made to the Bill to reflect some of them.

Although overall levels of crime have fallen using the established measurements, the recent uplift in serious violent crime is hugely worrying to me and everyone else in the House, particularly in our capital city, where my constituency is located. Even my constituency of Chipping Barnet has not been immune from this problem, with a fatal shooting in Cockfosters in February. The Bill will assist the fight against this type of brutal crime.

At the summit held in April, which was attended by the Home Secretary, the Mayor of London and a broad range of elected representatives across London from different parties, there was widespread agreement on the need for a robust policing and criminal justice response, and this legislation will assist on that score, because it will help to keep dangerous weapons off our streets. I attended the summit, where we also agreed that we needed to go beyond a policing and justice response to tackle this problem. We agreed that a renewed focus was needed on early intervention to try to prevent young people from becoming involved in gangs. I welcome the fact that many Members have made similar points this afternoon, and that this point is a key part of the Government’s serious violence strategy. I very much hope that the early intervention youth fund, which is part of the Government’s strategy, can play a valuable role in bringing to an end this totally unacceptable spike upwards in the murder rate—including, sadly, crimes involving the sorts of offensive weapons targeted in the Bill.

It is important to deliver on the commitments in the Government’s strategy on county lines, which, as others have said, are bringing the blight of drug-related serious violence to many towns, cities and, indeed, rural areas across the country. In London we need the Government, the Mayor, the police, and local groups and communities to work together to combat this new menace to children and young people. I therefore welcome the commitment in the Government’s strategy to support local groups and partnerships, which need to be at the heart of an effective response to these problems.

We should be in no doubt that it is possible to bring down levels of this type of serious violent crime because that has been done before in this city. In the closing years of Ken Livingstone’s mayoralty, there was a similar jump in the murder rate, but this was brought down by determined action by his successor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and his deputy Mayor for policing, Stephen Greenhalgh. I appeal to the Government and the current Mayor to learn from what the former Mayor was able to achieve. In particular, the current Mayor needs to hold the police to account regarding their delivery of the objectives that he sets them in this important area.

The role of the Mayor in holding the police to account is an important part of an effective criminal justice response to serious crime. I also believe that the Mayor should reconsider his decision to close Barnet police station. The station came under threat in 2012, 4.33 pm
but I was one of a number of people who helped to persuade the previous Mayor to keep it open, so it was saved then, but its closure by the current Mayor has caused considerable anxiety.

I accept that front-desk services in police stations are not as heavily used as they once were, and that there are now many different ways in which to report crimes to the police. This issue is not just about front desk closures. Once the Mayor’s closure plans go ahead in full, the police in Barnet will be left with no base at all in my constituency of Chipping Barnet. I am concerned that a visible police presence in my constituency will inevitably be greatly reduced when all officers are based several miles away in Colindale.

Dr Offord: Is my constituency neighbour aware that the London Borough of Barnet is one of the largest London boroughs and one of the largest net contributors to the Metropolitan police budget? This means that we do not get the police officers that we pay for. There are 736 people in Barnet per officer, whereas the rest of London—including the City of Westminster—has just 529 residents per police officer. Does my right hon. Friend think that that is fair?

Theresa Villiers: I do not. I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s highlighting of that problem. I am going to come on to it, because we need a fairer system for the allocation of resources in our capital city—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell).

I am concerned about the impact of the police station closure on visible police presence. Only today, I received a report of retailers being robbed in High Barnet, with a recent incident of men in balaclavas who were wielding weapons robbing a shop in broad daylight in front of frightened children. Over recent months, during the regular doorstep calls that I undertake in my constituency, many people have highlighted their anxiety about burglary. I appreciate that budgets are constrained, but I have appealed to the Mayor to give Barnet a fairer allocation of police resources to help provide concerted action on burglary and other crimes, including those involving the offensive weapons targeted in this Bill. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), Barnet has fewer police per head than many other boroughs, although, sadly, we face a number of problems very similar to those of inner-London boroughs.

Julian Knight: What my right hon. Friend is saying is very resonant for me, because our police and crime commissioner closed our police station in Solihull. Burglars, in particular, often use fear-inducing weapons such as zombie knives and death stars to commit violence. Does she agree that this Bill is very welcome in that respect?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Burglary is a deeply distressing crime for its victims, but unfortunately it can be made very much worse by threats of violence and the use of weapons of the type targeted by this Bill.

The Mayor of London does have choices with regard to resources. He has, for example, about half a billion pounds in reserves. He is proudly allocating £150 million to cycling measures. He had earmarked £60 million to pedestrianise Oxford Street. This is not the occasion to debate the merits of those funding choices, but it shows that even with a small switch from those priorities to policing, the Mayor could keep our police station in High Barnet open. It is not for the Mayor to blame the resources he is given by Government. He has choices and he should make them in a responsible way that gives the suburbs their fair share of police resources.

Finally, I want to share with the House some very depressing news on a crime committed in my constituency at the weekend. On Sunday, thieves broke into the site of the Summer Soulstice festival in Mays Lane in Arkley. They used acetylene cutting gear and hammers to break into a safe and made off with over £45,000 in takings from the event that was awaiting transfer to the bank the next day. It seems that they may have deliberately planned the break-in to coincide with the England World cup game, when those clearing up after the festival had gone home to watch the football.

This crime is made all the more repellent by the fact that the Soulstice festival is entirely run by volunteers and all its proceeds go to a local charity, Cherry Lodge Cancer Care. The event was established in memory of Andy Weekes, who was sadly lost to cancer in 2006, and it has raised over a quarter of a million pounds for Cherry Lodge over the course of 11 years. The family of the late Andy Weekes and the whole team behind Soulstice are apparently devastated by what has happened. I am sure that the whole House will share my dismay about this crime. I do not imagine that the perpetrators are likely to read Hansard, but they should feel a deep sense of shame about what they have done. I very much hope that the police will catch them swiftly and that they will be locked up for a very long time indeed.

4.44 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure, if that is the right word, to speak in this important debate. From the outset, may I say how much I associate myself with the comments made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)? The speeches by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Members for East Ham (Lyn Brown) and West Ham (Stephen Timms) were strong and compelling, particularly in their urging the Government to include a wider range of acidic substances in the list of those that we seek to prohibit the carrying of, particularly by those who are 18 or under.

I hope I will not be accused of making an overtly party political point. However, I have served for a short period as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, and I have listened to a huge number of speeches and oral questions at Home Office questions. Given that very often, though not exclusively, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester said, this is seen as a London-centric and urban daily threat, I am surprised by the lack of representation on the Opposition Benches today, with the exception of the fine speech by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and the right hon. Member for West Ham ( Lyn Brown). I am slightly surprised that we who have often spoken most loudly about the need for this legislation and what underpins the imperatives that drove it are conspicuous by their absence this afternoon.
Sunshine, I know, can be a rather seductive entity, but I thought they might haveforgotten that for just a few hours on an issue of this importance.

The key thing to bear in mind is that, while the debate is often painted within the confines of an urban narrative, this affects all our towns and cities across the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester said. On 7 January 2016, a hairdresser in my constituency, Katrina O’Hara, was putting the rubbish out at the end of the working day in the little courtyard behind the barbershop in which she worked in Blandford Forum. Blandford Forum is a jewel in the North Dorset crown. It is a small Georgian market town; it is not one of the fleshpots of metropolitan England by any stretch of the imagination. Katrina was attacked by a former partner with a knife that he had taken from the kitchen drawer in his house. He stabbed her. She died of her injuries. He attempted then to take his own life, but was apprehended and resuscitated by Dorset police. He was put on trial and found guilty.

I relate that story because, as one can imagine, it had the most huge and profound effects on a market town community like Blandford Forum. The ramifications of it still reverberate in conversations just over two years later. It was not a crime perpetrated by drug users or by minors, and it was not a crime in which somebody had to go out and buy a knife to use as a weapon, either directly from retail or on the internet; the knife was just taken out of a kitchen drawer. That is the scale of the issue that this sort of legislation is trying to grapple with.

There is much to commend in the Bill. The Home Office and the relevant Ministers are to be saluted for their clear care and dedication in the consultation process and in talking to Members. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave a commitment to my hon. Friend for The Cotswolds that that conversation would continue, and that is important.

As I say, there is much to commend in this legislation and the foundations of it are clear, but I would echo the comments made by a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and indeed by right hon. and hon. Members of the Opposition, about how, although the foundations may be very secure, the edifice emerging through the Committee process will require some work. On the eve of my 49th birthday, I may be able to claim some similarity with that. My foundations are fine—

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): You must be older than that.

Mark Garnier: His 59th—no, 69th—

Simon Hoare: I am ignoring the comments of my hon. Friends.

Mark Garnier: Give him a bus pass!

Simon Hoare: I’ll give you something in a minute.

There is a clear and compelling narrative that some changes to the Bill are needed as it moves forward. What does the Bill seek to achieve? If anybody thinks that by the stroke of a legislative pen and the creation of new statutes these crimes will be eliminated—I am not suggesting for a moment that Ministers on the Treasury Bench believe this—they will find that that is not going to be the case, although the Bill will clearly act as a deterrent.

As so often, however, when putting in place deterrents, we have to be careful. We know who we are seeking to deter, but very often the legislative deterrent has no impact at all on their daily modus operandi of criminality, gangland behaviour, drug dealing and so on. However, as an unforeseen consequence, it may be the most terrible burden and nuisance to law-abiding citizens trying to go about their daily business or to pursue their hobby. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds mentioned, we quite rightly have one of the most, if not the most, rigorous firearm licensing regimes in the world, but, notwithstanding that, we still have gun crime. Previous legislation has made certain pistols and handguns illegal, but they are very often the preferred weapon of those in gangs and the weapon of choice of others engaged in criminal activity.

Mark Garnier: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Notwithstanding my hon. Friend’s earlier rudery, I will give way.

Mark Garnier: I am sure my hon. Friend needs to take the weight off his feet for a moment or two during his magnificent speech. The important point he makes about gun crime is that it is committed not with legally owned guns, but with illegally owned guns. In keeping guns away from criminals, the law is probably not working as well as it should do, and that is what should be addressed.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), was a prosecuting barrister in a previous life. She will know, as lots of other people do—[Interruption.] Ah, here she is; she arrives. As if by magic, my hon. Friend is summoned up. I was just saying that, in a previous existence, she was a prosecuting barrister, and I know—not least because she has told me this on so many occasions—that she will appreciate the importance of evidence. We are making law, and as important as the issues are that we are seeking to address, the law has to be based on evidence.

It may well be that there are certain things that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench cannot tell the House: there may be evidence from the National Crime Agency and others that it would be entirely inappropriate to share with those who are not Privy Counsellors, or whatever. However, I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier). Like colleagues, I have yet to find any canon of persuasive evidence that does not lead me, for what that is worth, to the conclusion that if we harry and pursue the softest targets—those who have a licence, those obeying the law to the letter and those who have clearly indicated, in response to consultation, their willingness to go the extra mile in terms of security, vetting, referencing and so on and so forth—they will be the ones most affected, without the concomitant benefit of increasing safety on our streets.

If there is evidence telling us that a whole cadre of crimes is committed on our streets by people who are licensed to have a shotgun or other firearm, clearly the House will need to recalibrate its message on that point.
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The problem would be if people who lawfully hold a shotgun or firearm see this legislation and think that they might be criminalised next. They fear that this is setting a precedent and they do not know where it is going to end.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right about that. Those who see these things as the opening of a Pandora’s box are often right to see proposals in that way, and I am inclined to think that we are not necessarily looking at this from the right end of the telescope. I would much prefer a far more rigorous approach to sentencing, so that it actually acts as a deterrent, and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester and others have intimated the same. I am not convinced that the criminal minds, the modern-day Fagins who recruit these often vulnerable youngsters to commit these crimes to aggrandise the Fagins of, particularly but not exclusively, the drug world, will give tuppence ha’penny about what statute law says. If they want to get hold of a shotgun or something else, they will jolly well do it. We need to be focusing a lot more attention on sentencing than we have hitherto.

Obviously, we have do this as part of a legislative mosaic, which, as others have said, calls for even greater intergovernmental and cross-departmental working. The Times has been running an interesting series of articles this week. It has alluded to all the things that we know about gang culture—family breakdown, the lack of feeling of belonging, a lack of aspiration, poor educational attainment, and that self-breeding fear and anxiety that says, “I live in an unsafe area so I must tool up to protect myself.” In that way, the cycle just continues and continues. A lot of additional work needs to be done and other Departments need to be involved in it.

I wish to say a few words about the impact on small businesses. I do not understand the logic of a lot of these proposals on where and how one can sell, and on not delivering to a residential address. I am sure the Minister will be able to fill, to the point of overflowing, the lacuna in my knowledge of this, but I cannot understand the differential in respect of being able to have something delivered to a business premises or a post office, but not being able to have it delivered to one’s own personal address—likewise, where the Bill says that even if someone has ordered something online, they have to collect it from the branch. That is fine for national operators, but I have received a number of representations on this. Some have come from Mr Duncan Chandler, an artisan manufacturer of woodland and survival knives in my constituency, who is anxious about this matter and the impact it has on his business. Others have come from Mr Philip Hart, who runs the excellent Harts of Stur, 80% of whose kitchenware, which includes knives, is sold online across the country—the company has only one branch and it is in North Dorset. I ask the Minister to think in Committee about the proposals on where and how one can sell, and continues. A lot of additional work needs to be done and other Departments need to be involved in it.

In conclusion, I support this legislation. If it is pressed to a Division, I shall certainly vote in favour of its Second Reading, but with a presumption that there will be some fairly dramatic changes in Committee: a greater understanding of the needs and difficulties of small businesses in particular, and an element of rural proofing. We are trying to address a national issue, but as it stands the Bill does not reflect some of the differentials between urban and rural living. I draw comfort from the fact that the Minister understands rural issues to her fingertips, representing, as she does, the second most beautiful part of the country after North Dorset.

5 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). I am sorry to have missed a few of the earlier speeches; I had to be at a sitting of the Home Affairs Committee. The quality of the debate has been excellent and I am happy to support the Bill. It is a pity that it has been made necessary in the light of a recent uptick in violent crime, and not only in London. As my hon. Friend just said, the devil will be in the detail when it comes to practical implementation. We all know that acid and knives are not in themselves offensive weapons; the person using them makes them so.

I do, however, have some reservations, which I share with a number of hon. Friends, about the proposals on .50 calibre rifles. Shooting is a legitimate pursuit for sport or countryside activities. As Members have said on numerous occasions, it is weapons held without a licence by criminals that cause the crimes. Legitimately held, licensed weapons are very rarely involved.

Our gun control laws are rightly among the tightest in the world. I do not want to do anything that would weaken that, and I would certainly not go down the absurd lines of President Trump’s recent statement that the reason for our upsurge in knife crime is that we do not have gun ownership to combat it. That is a very slippery slope, and I do not think anybody has taken it seriously in this country, but we need to make sure that the restrictions are evidence based and properly risk assessed.

We are talking about fewer than 1,000 of the 2.25 million rifles and guns held legitimately on certificate—just 700 rapid-fire rifles and 132 .50 calibre rifles are involved. I have had more representations on that element of the Bill than on any other, particularly from disabled constituents who have used these rifles as part of their recreational activity.

The shooting community views these prohibitions as a gross breach of natural justice. Despite repeated requests, the Home Office has failed to provide any evidence that the rifles pose a risk to public safety. As it stands, applicants must provide clear and evidenced good reason for each and every rifle they wish to acquire and use. The very few who apply for and use high-muzzle-energy rifles have well documented and good reasons, and are limited to using them on specific ranges. Various shooting associations have suggested enhancing suitability assessments if that would help to prevent an outright ban, which seems disproportionate.

It is also reasonable to ask the Government what reductions in firearms crimes are expected as a result of the prohibitions in the Bill. It is difficult to see what problem we are trying to solve.
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I have had representations from members of legitimate rifle clubs, such as the Aldershott Rifle and Pistol club. My constituent Martin runs the local disability forum. He shoots from a wheelchair using one of these guns. He started target shooting as an Air Training Corps cadet back in 1959. Prohibition would end his participation in the sport, because his disability means that it is not easy for him to use the alternatives. It is notable that of the 10,712 responses to the Government consultation, over 60% related to these firearms proposals.

I want to talk briefly about acid. I am pleased with the inclusion in the Bill of measures to deal with acid. This is a particularly cruel and vicious form of attack. People can recover from a gunshot or knife wound, with minimal scars in some cases, but the effects of acid are a life sentence of disfigurement, especially when acid has been used on the face. If anything, acid attacks deserve harsher sentences than attacks using some of the more conventional weapons we have been describing.

The problem is that there are no official statistics on the extent of acid attacks. Voluntary data across 39 police forces found that there were some 408 acid attacks between November 2016 and April 2017, which represented a large increase on estimates that had gone before. It is also interesting that such attacks are prevalent in certain cultures, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, and among jilted partners. Globally, on the figures we have, 80% of the victims are women, but in this country the majority of victims are white men.

I pay tribute to the work of the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). He is not in his place, but he spoke earlier. When I looked at this issue, I was astonished to find that acid is freely available online to anybody of any age, including children. Incredibly, certain forms of acid needed in the making, as my wife does, of jams and cordials are restricted to registered pharmacies, but this stuff can be bought online without any problem. It has to be right to restrict the sale, at least to under-18s. It has to be right to beef up the penalties for possessing harmful corrosive substances where they are intended to cause injury.

The devil will be in the detail. The evidence shows that only one offence in five involving acid is committed by a child under the age of 18. We need qualifications in the Bill on substances that are capable of causing permanent harm. There is also a worry about the number of people coming forward: according to the St Andrews Centre for Plastic Surgery and Burns, fewer than half of acid attack victims in this country pursue criminal charges against their attacker.

On knife crime, again we need make to the tools of violence as difficult to procure as possible. I see absolutely no legitimate reason for possession of zombie knives and so on. There are all sorts of problems: age-verfication online, as trading standards has stated; what we do about weapons imported from overseas; and what the duty of care will be on Royal Mail and other carriers.

The rise in knife crime in London has been particularly horrendous. What has been more worrying since 2014 is that the age of both victims and perpetrators has been getting younger and younger. That is, of course, drug related.

We have to look at the complicity of social media. The major social media companies have been in front of the Home Affairs Committee with regard to radicalisation, access to hardcore imagery and hate crime. Increasingly, we are seeing easy accessibility to gang rap songs, with gangs brandishing and glorifying knives on social media platforms. That needs to be prevented in the first place and taken down immediately when spotted. Social media companies need to be much more responsible and proactive.

I query why the Bill does not, as far as I can see, extend the existing offence of having a knife or offensive weapon on school premises to cover other types of educational institution, as was covered in the consultation, but the problem is bigger than just the availability of offensive weapons, and bigger than just having stiffer sentences.

The measures in the Bill will increase the use of mandatory minimum custodial sentences for children, yet evidence shows that custody is failing in being rehabilitative. Last year, 69% of children released from custody reoffended within a year. That is a considerably higher figure than for those who were given community sentences, so we need to think much smarter about the criminal justice system and how we keep people out of jail and sustainably out of trouble.

Working in partnerships, we need to understand why gang culture in this country is increasingly using these weapons. I filmed a documentary back in 2009 called “Tower Block of Commons” in which I spent time with youth gangs in Newtown in inner-city Birmingham. Through the help of former gang members who then set up a charity to try to rehabilitate some of these people and bring them back in from the dark side, I began to understand some of the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of people who turn to gangs. This is about not just the penalties and the availability, but understanding the mindsets of the people who think it is good to use these weapons.

Finally, the Bill is just one part of a jigsaw, but we need to be smarter and take a much more holistic approach to violent youth crime.

5.11 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a prevalent liberal misassumption that things can only get better. Their mindset is that progress is inevitable and that whatever we do, society will advance. It is true that, as Disraeli said:

“Change is inevitable...change is constant”,

but things can simultaneously deteriorate as well as improve. In my lifetime, there is no question but that that is exactly what has happened.

In the 60 years of my life—I know you are thinking, Mr Deputy Speaker, “How can that possibly be true? How can that callow youth standing before me possibly have been born in 1958?”, but it is true—civil society has been weakened, respect for authority has dwindled and many of the once routine civilities and courtesies that mitigate the inevitable pitfalls of human existence have been derided, eroded or abandoned. Consequently, life is less gentle than it was when I was a boy. Many have been brutalised and some are brutal. It is very difficult for the liberal establishment to come to terms with that, because the unhappy reality of increasing disorder and criminality contrasts with the myth of progress. It is therefore either disguised or ignored by those who cannot bear to face the facts.
The idea that things are not getting better is unpalatable, which is why the Bill is pertinent and welcome. Crime has many causes, and some have been rehearsed in the debate. They include communal disintegration, family breakdown and the absence of opportunity, but fundamentally criminal behaviour is about the absence of values—values that the law-abiding take as read: care for others, personal responsibility, respect for the rule of law. In the absence of those values, the gulf is filled by altogether less desirable things—greed, anger, sloth, lust, gluttony, envy, pride. They are not, after all, new sins; they have been common to the human condition since man was made—and the results can be deadly.

Crime is not an illness to be treated, and the perpetrators of crime are not patients. Crime is the product of choices that people make. Those choices might have been affected by their circumstances, but it is pretty insulting to working-class people of the kind I was brought up among to tell them they are more likely to be criminals because they live on a council estate, work in a factory or never had a formal education of the kind I and many here enjoyed. Let us be clear: we have to identify malevolent behaviour and deal with it appropriately in the interests of public respect for the fairness of the justice system. Every time we do not, we undermine the regard for the rule of law among less well-off people—those hard-working decent people who do the right thing and do not choose the course of crime but go about their lives in a peaceable, decent and honourable way.

Let us now think about what more needs to be done. Certainly we need to tackle some of the “drivers” of crime, as they have been described by other Members. I have mentioned a few, in the context of health and the life of civil society, but I think that the internet is, or can be, a malevolent influence in this regard. We need to get tough with the social media platforms that glamorise violence, and, in particular, glamorise the use of the weapons of violence.

As I suggested earlier to the Home Secretary, we also need to adopt a cross-departmental approach to deal with support for the family and support for communities. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—who I thought spoke extremely well, as I told her privately—mentioned early intervention. Early intervention does matter, and there is no better early intervention than a strong and stable family. My early intervention was my mum and dad, who taught me the difference between what was right and what was wrong. You can fudge these things, and you can have a high-flown debate in fancy terms about sociology, but in the end it comes back to that: people having a very fundamental sense of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, and what is good and what is bad behaviour. Families really matter in that respect.

We know that there is an association—if I may get sociological for a moment—between certain kinds of young people and crime. They tend to be young people whose families have broken down, and who have not had the role model of a strong father. We need to take a lateral approach in considering some of those causal factors.

Finally—

Eddie Hughes: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: No, because I want to conclude my remarks.
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Mr Hughes, you are very close to the top of the list. I am sure you do not want to go down the list. I know that Mr Hayes is about to finish his speech. Come on, Mr Hayes.

Mr Hayes: As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, generosity is not merely my middle name; it is my every name. None the less, my dear friend will have to wait, because I am about to conclude my remarks.

The real risk with the Bill is not going too far, but not going far enough; not taking more steps than are necessary, but not taking the necessary steps. I will leave the House with Proust. Proust said, “You must never be afraid to go too far, because the truth lies beyond.” There is no Minister in this Government more committed to the pursuit of the truth than the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who will sum up the debate.

5.22 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I do not have any Proust. Instead, I will regale you with west midlands crime figures.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Crime figures will do fine.

Julian Knight: It is a great pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for the rather evocative-sounding South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). I thought that his speech was superb in its evocation and exploration of the rise in crime over such a long timescale. It was very informative indeed.

I agree with my right hon. Friend him about the glorification of knife culture in social media, which was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). We need to get a grip on social media companies, because they have a wide responsibility. They are not above and beyond society; they are part of society. We should not treat them in a way that makes them publishers, as it were, but they must be reminded of their responsibility to invest the necessary resources to ensure that such things are kept off their platforms, as quickly as possible.

This Bill represents a much-needed update in the law governing offensive weapons. It is an unfortunate fact that criminals are wont to adapt to new conditions when the law changes, so it is important for the Government to move swiftly to close loopholes when they arise.

I wanted to speak in the debate because of the almost silent gun and knife epidemic in the west midlands. It may surprise Members to know that the level of gun crime is higher there than it is in London: over 25 gun crimes per 100,000 people. In fact, the region is the only part of the country in which that level is reached. We also unfortunately have the third highest rate of knife crime of all areas of the country; only the Metropolitan police area and West Yorkshire are above us. To give a bit of context, Warwickshire abuts Birmingham and the West Midlands Police area, and knife crime in that area is almost half the level that it is in the west midlands.

I see evidence of this on a regular basis in Solihull. We do not experience incidences of shootings and stabbings, thank goodness, at this time, and I hope this Bill will help to prevent any such incidences, but we are seeing a growth in aggravated acquisitive crime involving knives, particularly terror-inducing knives such as death star and zombie knives. I think of death stars as planet-killing weapons from “Star Wars”. Death star knives are absolutely shocking and there is no need for that knife to be in production at all, and there is no need for any individual to purchase such a knife. As acquisitive crime, particularly car crime, has increased, I have heard reports that criminals have sometimes brandished those knives. At present, because London gets a lot of focus there is not sufficient focus to ensure that we crack down on as hard as possible. That is one of the reasons why I support the Bill; it will help indirectly to keep my residents safe.

The response of the police and crime commissioner has not helped the situation at all. Despite a massive rise in acquisitive crime—over 29% over the past year in Solihull borough—he has chosen to close, without any proper consultation, Solihull police station, effectively leaving 209,000 people without a police station. We have been promised that at some unspecified date in future there will be a new front desk effectively; that could be in a shopping centre or in Chelmsley Wood in the north of the borough. As a resident of the south of that borough, I can say that it is easier for me to get to Warwick than to get to Chelmsley Wood in the north of the borough. What message does that send out to the public when we are seeing an increase in violent acquisitive crime? Residents are saying, “We are paying our council taxes; Solihull residents are paying for an increase in precept, yet the police station is being closed.”

That will lead to longer response times. The police station is located at the centre of the constituency and of Solihull borough. If it is located at some unspecified date in the future in the north, there will be longer response times, or officers might have to come out of area from Coventry or parts of Birmingham. My residents are extremely concerned about that.

Turning to the mechanics of the Bill, the main policy concern is about balancing the Government’s aims against the rights and liberties of individual citizens. I take on board the point that many hon. Friends have mentioned about .50 calibre rifles, and I am glad that those concerns are being listened to by the Government and there is active engagement. I, too, have been approached by the law-abiding shooting community, which is very cognisant of the need for gun control and very supportive of it. It has said to me that there is always a possibility that people could end up not being able to pursue their sport because of this change. I am pleased that we are at least looking at that and addressing it.

More generally, criminalising the possession of these articles will make it much easier for the police to intervene before they are used against the public—my constituents. The Bill introduces sensible requirements for online vendors to ensure that they are not selling restricted articles to under-age buyers; this is another example of how technology and evolving consumer habits can leave the law behind.

While these specific measures will no doubt help to reduce the presence of dangerous weapons in our public spaces, I am glad that the Government recognise that the problem of violent crime cannot be tackled in isolation. In the foreword to the “Serious Violence Strategy” published in April, the then Home Secretary made it clear that she intended to wage a comprehensive campaign that included not only law enforcement but charities, communities and the private sector, as well as...
health and education partners. That is commendable, and I hope that the Government will maintain that commitment, tackling not only violent crime but the driving forces behind it. That is something that has been reflected by the societal issues that have been raised in the debate today.

It is the first duty of the Government to protect the public, and it is right that the recent spate of vicious acid attacks has drawn a prompt legislative response. I have no doubt that the Bill will help to protect the public. This is the vilest crime that I can imagine. The horror of an individual splashing acid on to someone’s face would keep many of us awake at night. These crimes follow people throughout their lives, and we have seen instances in which people have taken their lives as a result of such acid attacks.

In conclusion, I support the Bill. In almost every respect, it is a fit and good Bill, and I look forward to supporting it. More generally, I want to send a loud and clear message to the West Midlands police and crime commissioner that the Government are doing their job and that he now needs to do his by ensuring that my community is properly protected and that we have a working police station in a town of 209,000 people.

5.31 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I want to begin by welcoming the nature of this debate. I am a relatively new Member in this place, and this is unfortunately one of only a handful of times when I have sat through a debate where there has been genuinely measured and constructive comment from both sides and where Members have made new, interesting and constructive criticism of the Bill in question. I hope that the criticisms we have heard today will improve this one. I would single out the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who is no doubt that the Bill will enable the police to prosecute a greater number of offenders and keep my constituents in Mansfield safe. As my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) said, drugs are a huge driver of violent crime, and I hope that the Government will also build a strategy around the changing nature of the drugs market, which is having a huge impact in my constituency. I met Nick Butler, the neighbourhood policing inspector in Mansfield, earlier this month, and it was good to talk to him about his work and his priorities locally. It was clear from our conversation that, while police officers are working hard and are keen to catch criminals, they need the powers to do that and the ability to charge offenders robustly. I believe that the Bill will enable the police to do that more easily and to target this particular brand of criminals more effectively.

Legislation that creates extra controls on knives and corrosive substances that are bought online is important. Our laws need to keep up with technological change and the changing nature of violent crime. The Bill will make it harder for young people to buy knives and acid online, with sellers requiring rigorous age verification to prove that those purchasing knives or corrosives are over the age of 18. That is a huge step forward in tackling the changing way in which people get hold of those weapons. It is good news that crime has fallen by more than a third since 2010, but the increase in violent crime in particular is worrying, and I am glad that the Government are taking decisive action to tackle this issue.

The first serious violence strategy, which was commissioned by the Home Secretary and which is backed by £40 million of funding, marks an important step in our response to knife and gun crime. It strikes a balance between prevention and law enforcement, and crucially targets violent behaviours at an early age. As Members on both sides of the House have said, education, intervention and support are huge factors to go along with taking action against such weapons. Early intervention is incredibly important—the early intervention youth fund for community projects is another example of helping people to live lives free of violent crime. Other Government legislation can have an impact. Hon. Members have mentioned the impact of social media regulation on the lives of young people and their access to things that might radicalise them or promote violent behaviour.

I have come to a passage in my notes that I have crossed out—it was particularly mean about Labour—so I will move on to the clever things that other hon. Members have mentioned. I would have said them first had I been called earlier. If my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is correct on the detail, what he says makes perfect sense. There is no reason why threats with a knife made in the home should be any less of a priority than threats made in public areas. I am sure that the Minister more than recognises the impact of domestic violence, which is in her brief. She has been to Mansfield to meet domestic violence charities in my constituency and has seen the impact first hand—my constituency has the highest level of domestic violence in Nottinghamshire. I hope that the problem raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley can be improved at a later stage.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that our hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) made a good point when he
referred to police response times? The speed with which the police respond is important in snuffing out crime, particularly in developing situations in town centres.

Ben Bradley: My right hon. Friend is right. The police response to incidents is important. I am very pleased that the structures within our response and neighbourhood policing have changed. I hope that that and additional officers will improve the situation in Nottinghamshire—I am sure that that is replicated in other forces around the country.

A number of colleagues raised the distinction between weapons at the opposite ends of the scale—weapons used for crime and those used in sport, agriculture or rural communities that are safe and properly licensed. All the signs are that Government Front Benchers are listening and that those points will be carefully considered in Committee.

That said, the Bill is a significant commitment as part of our work to tackle serious violence and to make it harder than ever for people to get their hands on dangerous weapons. Banning the possession of weapons such as zombie knives and knuckledusters is a positive step. In many ways, it is unfortunate that we have to legislate—I am not naturally a proponent of banning lots of things—but this is an important and all-too-necessary part of the Bill.

The rise of acid attacks is simply horrific. Creating a new criminal offence of selling corrosive substances to under-18s is a positive step in the right direction, along with preventing the delivery of those substances to people’s homes. Importantly, the Government will ensure that police have the powers to arrest people who carry such corrosive substances in public. I hope that we can continue to equip local police with robust powers, particularly to deal with the drugs issues that I have mentioned.

The Government are determined to help to prevent the sale and possession of dangerous weapons. This tough legislation will make it harder than ever for people to get their hands on them. I am glad we are taking decisive action and look forward to supporting the Bill.

5.38 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I want to explain briefly why I was so keen to intervene on my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) briefly popped into the Chamber. I am a fan and enthusiastic supporter of her manifesto for strengthening families and I wanted to acknowledge her presence while she was here, but you very wisely stopped me doing so, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The idea of banning stuff does not come naturally to me. I have the tendencies of a classical liberal inasmuch as I believe that the freedom of the individual is considerably more important. However, I agree wholeheartedly with two thirds of the banning provisions in the Bill. Why would I not? In fact, we might ask ourselves why we are having to ban these things. Why have they not been banned already?

Some Members will be much more conversant than I am with some of the terms used in the Bill, but I had to google the term “zombie knife” to understand what one is. The classic definition is that a zombie knife has a straight and a serrated cutting edge but also includes markings or wording that suggests the knife will be used for violent ends. The idea that we might sell such things, the idea that someone thought it a good idea to design such an overtly violent piece of equipment and then sell it, strikes me as a bit crazy in the first place, so we are unfortunate to be in this position.

My excellent local newspaper, the Express & Star, is, as, has been mentioned previously, campaigning to ensure that other knives are considered for inclusion in future legislation. When we walk down the high street and see the range of what can only be described as weapons that are freely available, we need to ask ourselves what other purpose they could possibly have than to be used for acts of violence or intimidation.

Banning such knives is clearly a good idea, because they are obviously offensive weapons, but I am not naturally given to the idea of banning things. I recently read this in the paper—I do not know whether it is true, but I just could not make it up—but did Jamie Oliver really meet Nicola Sturgeon to consider the banning of two-for-one pizzas? I do not know, but that is what I read. A guy who has allegedly made £240 million from selling food now wants to dictate what the less well-off can eat. A good middle-class family could go to one of Jamie’s restaurants and get a good deal on pizza, but he does not want the same opportunity for low-cost food to be extended to less well-off people. Counter-intuitive? Bonkers? Others can decide.

Instead of tackling the problem of children eating too much high-salt, high-energy food, how about endorsing the idea of a mile a day? All children should be encouraged to walk or run a mile a day, in the hope that the practice persists when they become adults. As someone who has spent six hours sat in the Chamber today, I would appreciate getting out to do my mile. I look forward to some exercise after this debate.

The idea that people might carry acid in public, in small amounts, for purposes other than to do harm to others is clearly also counter-intuitive, and it is something that we should ban.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good and hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. I do not understand how anyone can be allowed to buy acid except for scientific purposes; I just do not understand how that can happen in our society. What purpose would it serve other than to do bad?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend makes an important point. When people from the outside world look into this Chamber, they will question why some of these things are not already against the law. I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and in this Chamber we recently debated upskirting, which is another example of something about which the general public would surely think, “Are you crazy? Surely this should be against the law already.”

My hon. Friend makes a valid point, but perhaps we are asking and addressing the wrong question. By the time a young gang member, typically aged between 14 and 24, picks up a knife to carry out an assault, we have already failed them. A number of Government
programmes are upstreaming the work to try to prevent people from getting to that point in the first place. For example, £920 million has been invested in the troubled families programme, which started in 2011. A subsequent round of funding was agreed for 2015 to 2020, with the aim of reaching 400,000 families. It has had some mixed reviews of its effect, but the idea is that there are a certain number of families in communities—everybody knows who they are—who require intensive support from several agencies, both governmental and voluntary, and they need to be where we maximise our focus and effort because, as I said, once someone is in a gang something has already gone wrong.

Before I came to the House, I worked for the YMCA in Birmingham, a charity that supports young, previously homeless people. It has 300 accommodation units, but it does not just provide accommodation; it helps vulnerable people who need a wide range of support. These are people who are not used to accessing medical and health services in the way the rest of us would; they need to be got up in the morning and shown the way to the dentist and to the doctor so that they can attend appointments. It is clear that fragile people who are victims are one step away from a life of crime and gang culture. Often, those who engage in gang culture are reaching out for some validation—for somebody to say, “You’re welcome in our group, we will protect and support you, and you will be one of us.” That is surely the embodiment of what we consider family to be.

I completely endorse some elements of the Bill, but I am still confused about the measures on firearms. Members spoke eloquently earlier and from an informed position, asking, “Why are we trying to ban something that has super-limited previous exposure to crime and that is, generally speaking, held by people who have already gone through all sorts of security checks and is held in the most secure way?” Those provisions possibly feel like a step too far, so I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State say he would further consider that measure.

As a Government, we are doing the right thing by offering a broad range of support to the most vulnerable young people in society, because the upstreaming of support is incredibly important, and we should indeed be banning these weapons.

Finally, I have had a long-running disagreement with the West Midlands police and crime commissioner. He is moving police officers from Bloxwich in my constituency to Wolverhampton, thereby reducing response times and moving those officers away from the community that they serve. That is not a good move. The Government have provided him with extra resource by allowing him to increase the precept to put more police on the street, but he has patently failed to do so, because he believes that that money is better spent on office staff. That is completely wrong.

5.47 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). He is part of a small coterie of us who have sat through the whole of this afternoon’s debate, so I feel some sense of camaraderie with him.

There is a lot in the Bill to be welcomed. I think I speak for many in the House when I say that any legislation that improves our constituents’ safety is to be applauded. However, I wish gently to advise the Minister that legislation alone is not a panacea for reducing crime in the United Kingdom. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) have all said, the PCC determines priorities, and that affects the level of crime.

As a London MP, I can speak only about London. It is a fact that crime is on the rise in our capital and has been since the incumbent Mayor was elected. I say with no particular pleasure that it is rather disappointing that his standard excuse is that he could tackle the problem of violent crime if he had more resources. I certainly do not agree with that point of view. It is completely disingenuous of the London Mayor to demand more funding. The Government have continually provided financial support to him, including through a scheme for him to receive a cut from business rates, which has provided an additional £60 million. The Government have also allowed the Mayor to raise council tax to bring in an additional £49 million to support the police service in London. Therefore, overall, the Government have supported the Mayor by giving him access to more than £110 million, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull and for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) have mentioned. Then of course there are the millions of pounds that the Mayor of London holds in reserves.

All police services need legislation to address changing criminal behaviour. The vile issue of acid attacks is just one of those where the law needs to catch up. Indeed, under Ken Livingstone crime started to go up, but his replacement—my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—Stephen Greenhalgh, who has already been mentioned, and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made it a political priority to address violent crime, particularly crime affecting young people. History proves to us that policing is not just about money and legislation, but about political will.

I am very pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire has entered the Chamber and is in his place because I wish to mention the article he wrote in January for the Evening Standard. He said that when he was appointed deputy mayor for policing in London, the number of teenage murders in his first year was 29. He made it a political priority to address that rise and ensured that, when he left office, the number had been reduced to eight. The trajectory that he was previously on would have put the number of deaths at more than 50. The number of deaths in London now is about 80, so we are at a higher level.

My hon. Friend said that there was a culture in the Metropolitan police whereby teen murders were not considered statistically high in comparison with other world cities. That is appalling. He also said that the view of the Met police was that deaths of black youths were considered a fact of city life. That is abhorrent. He also outlined in his piece that many of the initiatives were controversial because they disproportionately affected black communities. That required him and the Mayor continuously to reassure communities that their actions were keeping their children safe. That is a commitment that the current Mayor should accept.
The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who has returned to her place but who is perhaps not entirely listening to me, made a claim that crime in London was not actually increasing—or that it was doing so proportionally slower than in the rest of the country. There are reasons for that. The significant population of London shows that any percentage increase has a disproportionate effect on crime. Under the leadership of the current Mayor, London is undergoing a surge in violent crime. Since the beginning of his mayoralty, acid attacks are up 65%, knife crime is up 44%, homicide is up 16%, GBH is up 8% and rape is up 36%. Indeed, the chairman of the London Police and Crime Committee has launched an inquiry into why policing in London is failing. He says that the rise is not only unacceptable but deeply troubling.

Back in April, seven people were murdered in the capital, and when asked repeatedly whether he had met the bereaved families, the Mayor told LBC Radio:

“No, I haven’t spoken to the bereaved families. I’ve got a deputy mayor and a police commissioner...the point is that we are a team.”

Well, I can say that, no, they are not. We introduced police and crime commissioners so that someone was accountable—so that an individual could be held responsible. That job is held by one person, and in London it is the Mayor. He may have a team supporting him, but he must take the lead, show leadership and stop hiding behind his employees. His standard response to any criticism is to release a press release, but given the fact that he has increased the budget of his press and public relations team to £2.5 million, he has time to do that. Recently, he put out a press release asking schools to take up his knife wand policy, which is laudable in its aspiration, but he had a take-up rate of just 2.4% of London schools. That has to be wrong, and it is not keeping our children safe.

In addition to the legislation that we are discussing today, there are lots of other things that the Mayor of London can do to tackle knife crime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just advise the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is not a personal attack on the Mayor of London? [Interruption] I am sorry; did the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) say something?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I didn’t say anything.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank you for that, because otherwise I would have something to say and that would not be helpful to you. I am just trying to be constructive. We are on Second Reading of a Bill, and I am allowing latitude, but Members must focus on the Bill.

Dr Offord: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is certainly not a personal attack. I can only illustrate my experience in the capital—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Spelthorne is helping out again. Let me just reassure you: the Bill is about knife crime, and not about other issues. As much as you think you are getting good advice from the hon. Gentleman, I would take your advice from the Chair.
on me. I was actually photographing at the time, and was pleased that I managed to take a picture of the perpetrator. He was subsequently convicted, but would not have been if not for my picture. My recollection of the person who fell into my arms with a big hole in his back will certainly never leave me.

We are approaching 80 murders within the capital this year. I conclude by mentioning two people, who were both my constituents. Back in the winter in Mill Hill, Vijay Patel was punched, hit his head and died; and Raul Nicolaie was stabbed to death in his house. I believe that this legislation will ensure that such tragedies do not occur in the future. I appeal to the Minister: if there is to be any legacy from this legislation, let this be her legacy, because the legacy of the Mayor of London currently is one of a lost generation.

5.58 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this debate, and, like a number of people, I have had the honour and privilege to sit through the vast proportion of it. The debate has been well conducted, with a lot of speeches touching on a number of important issues.

The issue of knife crime and murder in our capital city of London is highly relevant to the Bill. Let no one pretend that what is happening in London has not directly influenced the Government in their desire to see some form of legislation on this particular issue. The situation in the capital is, frankly, scandalous.

When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) was Deputy Mayor in charge of policing, the crime rates were significantly lower than they are today. That was because of policy and political leadership. It is entirely legitimate to suggest that the kind of leadership that London had at that time no longer exists. It would be invidious, I fully agree, to blame the current Mayor of London entirely for the situation in the capital. I am not saying that it is all his fault, but he does bear some responsibility for it.

It is no accident that, given the increase in knife crime and the increase in fatalities here in London—in our capital—the Government have introduced the Bill. Those two events, I would suggest, are related. It is therefore entirely appropriate for Members who represent London seats—my seat is just outside London, but many of the issues in London pertain to the bit of Surrey that I represent—to address and focus their remarks on the situation here in London.

The Bill has many excellent provisions. Surely the laws against selling dangerous acid to youngsters—to children, in many instances—are well overdue and will be well received across the House. There are issues relating to knives. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said that he thought it extraordinary that so-called zombie knives had not been banned a long time ago. He was quite right to suggest that the kind of leadership that London had at that time no longer exists. It would be invidious, I fully agree, to blame the current Mayor of London entirely for the situation in the capital. I am not saying that it is all his fault, but he does bear some responsibility for it.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. As he knows, the Bill has been drafted in such a way as to refer not to .5 calibre rounds, but to 13,600 joules of energy. The reason for doing that is to include other weapons, including .357 Lapua Magnum rifles, but that cannot account for the people who use home loads and lower the velocity of the round. The Bill is about whether the rifle is capable of firing it. People do use home loads, and they lower the capacity, the velocity and energy. The Bill does not account for that at all.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I suggested, there is a social context that gave birth to the Bill—a huge increase in violent crime and fatalities in London. The two things, as I said, are related. If the Government are trying to address the issue of knife crime and fatalities in our capital, it is beyond my imagination to understand why .5 calibre guns should be banned as proposed in the Bill.

I am delighted that the Secretary of State has openly and generously offered to meet MPs and other people for a wider consultation on the details in the Bill.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has put his finger on an interesting point. Clause 28(2) references “any rifle” from which a shot of more than 13,600 joules can be fired. The Bill is drafted much wider than just .5 calibre weapons.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a legitimate point. I hope that many of these difficulties and anomalies will be ironed out in Committee, because the Bill as drafted raises some interesting questions and, dare I say it, has a number of holes.

Broadly, we have to accept that something had to be done. The new spate of acid attacks is largely unprecedented. I understand, as a point of history, that in the 19th century people used sulphuric acid and other noxious substances in this way, but for our generation this is completely unprecedented, and it is quite right for the Government to legislate to curtail the sale of this offensive weapon.

Broadly, this is a good Bill and I am fully happy to support its Second Reading, as I suspect are the vast majority of Members on both sides of the House, but I urge Ministers to consider some of the objections made in this wide-ranging and stimulating debate to certain of its provisions.
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Prior to the debate, we were furnished with a huge number of statistics, and those statistics make stark and appalling reading, because behind every one of them is a real life that has been lost, a family that has been destroyed or a person left with life-changing disfigurement and injury. In 2017—a particularly bad year—we saw a 22% increase in offences involving knives, an 11% increase in firearms offences and a near tripling of recorded corrosive substance attacks. Within a few miles of where we sit, in the city of London, we have seen more than 70 murders just this year.

I am pleased that a good proportion of the Bill is devoted to putting on a statutory footing many of the voluntary commitments that retailers have given over the last couple of years, and I know that many local authorities have worked with local traders to implement codes of practice regarding knife and corrosive substance sales. I am also pleased that the Bill extends to internet business-to-consumer sales, which is long overdue.

Clauses 12 to 27 contain expansive measures to restrict and control the supply and ownership of bladed items. That has been mentioned at length this afternoon, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). We need a complete prohibition of these things called zombie knives, which are particularly fearsome and have no value in what they look like. They are not like 18th-century samurai swords; they have one sole purpose. They have cutting, serrated edges and are deemed and bought to be threatening and offensive.

Bob Stewart: I am particularly concerned that on the internet, for under a tenner, one can buy a commando knife, which is the ultimate killing knife.

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend is all too aware of the use of such weapons from his previous life. He makes a valid point—it is not just zombie knives. All manner of offensive and dangerous weapons are available out there.

The provisions related to bladed articles are proportionate, robust and to be welcomed. However, the great problem, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) spoke, is that in every single kitchen in every single house there are the tools available to cause havoc on our streets. No matter how we frame the Bill, it is very difficult to legislate against the domestic knives that exist absolutely everywhere and are too often the weapon responsible for murders on the streets of this country.

Also, we heard clearly from my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that we must be careful not to criminalise the legitimate sale of bespoke, expensive cutlery by mail order. That is a consideration.

I support the thrust of the Bill—I absolutely support the measures against bladed weapons and chemicals—but I ask for some sensible thinking about single-shot high-energy rifles. I really beg the Minister to look again at internet facilitators, because it is time that they took responsibility for connecting businesses abroad with consumers at home and that they were held accountable for what they are doing in the consumer market.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of my constituents in Chelmsford write to tell me how concerned they are about the changing nature of crime. They know that crime overall has dropped, but they see more crime happening online and more violent crime. This morning, I spoke to my police and crime commissioner to make sure that I was fully up to date with what was happening on the streets. Violence with injury has increased by over 10% in Chelmsford in the past year, although that is lower than the national increase of 15%. Possession of weapons has increased by nearly 50%, and there has been a rise in wounding with intent.

My police and crime commissioner says that the police are doing a great deal. Operation Raptor is under review, while Operation Survey, which is targeted at serious violence, has also been helpful. They are launching their new violence and vulnerability framework, and they believe that they can get ahead of this surge. However, they want to make more use of stop-and-search, and a commitment to more policing resources. We know that a lot of this is related to county lines, and that the increased crime is related to the more complex
ways in which drugs are moved around the country by gangs. The Government and Parliament need to take a lot of action.

As elected politicians, our top priority is to care about the safety of those we represent, who expect us to act. The police and crime commissioner made a comment about extra resources. I was pleased to work last year with colleagues from across Essex in making a strong statement to the Policing Minister about the need to increase the cap on local police funding so that our police would get the resources that they need. Those extra 150 police officers are now being recruited and are going into action across Chelmsford.

We can do more about some of the causes of crime. In an intervention, I mentioned the young people who are being recruited into drugs-related gangs through online platforms. The evidence in the Science and Technology Committee was to do with drill music being played through YouTube; those who had written it could then directly message the young people. The point made in the Committee was that that could happen to any teenager and that no one is immune. That has definitely been seen in Chelmsford. I believe that we will act on this issue through the internet safety strategy, about which I have just had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

There is also the issue of what weapons are being used—that is why we are discussing this Bill about offensive weapons. We need to strengthen laws to prevent the possession and sale of knives in particular. I have seen many images shared by my local police of knives that they have intercepted—particularly the “zombie killer” type. I am pleased that the Government are taking action on knives.

There is also the issue of acid attacks. A few months ago, I visited Chelmsford mosque and spoke to some of the young people about what they felt as they went around the streets these days. I was taken by how many the young people about what they felt as they went ago, I visited Chelmsford mosque and spoke to some of the extra 150 police officers are now being recruited and are going into action across Chelmsford.

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There is also the issue of acid attacks. A few months ago, I visited Chelmsford mosque and spoke to some of the young people about what they felt as they went around the streets these days. I was taken by how many young members of that community referred to how concerned they were about recent acid attacks, particularly those carried out on some sort of religious grounds. If I can go back to that group now and say that we are strengthening the law to make it illegal for young people to buy acid and to carry it in a public place, that will be an extremely important and positive message. I am glad that such provisions are in the Bill.

I turn to firearms legislation. I never expected to spend a lot of my life as a politician working on that issue, but I do spend an enormous amount of time on it. I led the reform of European firearms legislation through the European Parliament a couple of years ago following the Paris attacks in the Bataclan theatre, where firearms that had supposedly been permanently deactivated—they therefore could be bought and sold without licences in many parts of Europe—were actually not deactivated. Pins had simply been put through the barrels; they were pulled out and the firearms were reactivated by the terrorists. Ninety people were murdered in that attack.

In the UK, we were not immune: 35 of those same firearms were found in a marina on our shores, having been smuggled here. The then Home Secretary—the current Prime Minister—went to Europe and said that we needed to tighten up European gun laws because those affect our own security. I must make one point: those incorrectly deactivated firearms could not have been bought and sold under our law without a licence because the UK has among the strongest—if not the strongest—firearms legislation of anywhere in Europe. It was absolutely in our interest to make sure that the rest of Europe rose to that challenge.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is correct about the measures relating to firearms. Does she agree that those who transgress and break the law are not those who have a licence to hold arms legally? The Government need to focus attention on the law breakers, not those who uphold the law.

Vicky Ford: I completely agree and that brings me to my next point. What I learnt from looking at our firearms legislation, and firearms legislation across the continent of Europe and in Ireland, is that there are many very good reasons why genuine law-abiding people may need to have a firearm. There are particular sensitivities relating to personal security in Northern Ireland, where many people have permission to hold firearms that would not be permitted in other parts of the UK. The devil is in the detail and it is really important detail. There are many legitimate reasons for why people might want to hold firearms. They could be historical re-enactors, filmmakers—Britain has more filmmakers using firearms than anywhere else in the world, which is one reason why we have such an active filmmaking industry—farmers, target shooters or people involved in the countryside.

My concern is that the Bill makes changes to what firearms are available to law-abiding citizens. Measures have possibly been strengthened without thinking through all the consequences. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to read just one email I received from a constituent:

“...I completely agree with the other sections of the Bill, but believe that these restrictions on the shooting community unfairly target law-abiding members of our society. I am a keen target shooter and police officer, and I don’t see how these restrictions will cut down on the amount of gun crime on our streets. I have yet to see any of this type of firearm that is due to be restricted used in any criminal activity.”

If we are to tighten the law in this area, we need to make sure that we maintain the confidence of the law-abiding gun-holding community and make sure we can explain to them the evidence the Minister has seen for changing the law.

6.22 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

I have had the opportunity to listen to the majority of contributions to the debate, but I would like to start my contribution by paying tribute to the Minister. She has gone out of her way—I have heard other Members refer to this as well—to go through the content of the Bill in detail, and to listen thoughtfully, productively and passionately to the arguments put forward. She knows that most of our arguments with the Bill focus on the firearms aspects, but I shall speak about the whole Bill in its current form.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a comment about not understanding why anyone would need to buy acid if they were not a scientist. I can only assume that he can afford a very good cleaner who has to procure and use such acids in his own home. There are many legitimate reasons why individuals might wish to buy acid—I am delighted for...
him that he does not have to go through the trials and tribulations of normal life like the rest of us—whether in a domestic setting, or for agricultural use. In industry, hydrochloride is regularly used for cleaning.

There are legitimate reasons for buying acid, but there have been incredibly harmful and distressing illegitimate uses of acid for personal attacks, and some for personal defence. They horrify us. We have seen the news stories and the ramifications. We have seen the efforts of countless passers-by and members of society who come along with bottles of water to try to clear acid from a victim’s eyes and skin. It is obnoxious that anyone would seek to use domestic acids for such a cruel purpose.

It is right that we as a Parliament decide that enough is enough and take steps to frustrate the purchase and illegal use of acid. This does not mean that acid will not be available if somebody really wants to get their hands on it, but the Bill will empower the police, giving them the powers to stop people having it who should not have it in a public place. That is the right step to take.

The Minister also knows that we raised some practical points relating to proposals on postage and delivery for the online purchase of blades. This issue is important, because if we look at Parliament’s consideration of online sales and its scrutiny through Select Committees of how online sellers and marketplaces describe themselves, we see that they have thoughtfully avoided much of the legislative restriction that we have sought to place on them, because they say that they only facilitate sales and that the contract is with the individual seller, not the marketplace. Whether it is Amazon or eBay, they have all argued, “Yes, you can have whatever legislative provision you want, but it does not attach to us—it attaches to the person who uses us as a forum to sell.”

Whether we do this with online delivery charges and considerations around the unfairness of differences in postal charges, it will be important, for the provision on the delivery of knives in particular, that we have complete buy-in and sign-up from the marketplaces, rather than just the sellers. It is important to make sure that we know who is buying the blade and that they are able to buy it—that they are of a legal age and we know their identity—and we need to make sure that all who are involved in the process adhere to the Bill. I hope that the Minister has thought about that, engaged with the online sellers and taken the opportunity to tell them that they also have a duty in this process.

I was flicking through my phone 20 minutes ago—I will not say who was speaking at the time, but it was no reflection on their contribution—but zombie knives and combat knives are available for purchase. People can go on websites that say, “Here are UK legal blades. Here are blades that fold, that are less than three inches, that are suitable penknives for sporting purposes, and so on,” but many other sites will callously sell something that is designed to hurt, injure or kill. Having seen and heard the outrageous and horrendous stories in our broadsheets, on our television screens, in our communities and from our constituents, it is important that we take steps—I am not saying that this is entirely the right way to frame the legislation—to provide protection in our community. Having never had the privilege of serving on a Bill Committee and being very unlikely to have the privilege of doing so, I hope that members of this Bill’s Committee will take the opportunity to thoughtfully consider the provisions and augment them in a way that will ensure that the Bill will do what the Minister hopes.

Let me turn, in particular, to the firearms provisions. I made an intervention that touched on energy and velocity, and I think there are fundamental issues, which I raised with the Minister. The first is about safety. When we consider safety, why is something above 13,600 joules unsafe but something under that is not? Why does this Parliament need to interject ourselves in this discussion? Are we saying that 13,599 joules is okay? Is it any less lethal? No, it is not.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In this Bill, the Government are considering removing .50 calibre rifles of a certain velocity. If someone shortens the barrel or reduces the load, however, they can reduce the impact of a .50 calibre rifle or anything else of that size. There are other ways to do this so that law-abiding people can obtain these guns.

Gavin Robinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but this is about the purpose of the Bill. What are we trying to achieve? Is it to make the public safer? The arbitrary figure of 13,600 joules cannot make the public safer. We are talking about law-abiding sport enthusiasts who have been through all the processes, as has been discussed this afternoon. Are we saying that 13,599 joules is okay, but 13,601 joules is not? It makes no sense. It is not just .50 calibre rifles either; it is exactly the same for .357 Lapua Magnum rifles. It does not matter if someone home loads, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, and lowers the velocity of the round, because the Bill is framed so that what matters is not what they put through a firearm but what the firearm is capable of delivering.

I am afraid that the public safety test in the Bill does not cut it. A .22 rifle can remove life and has a much lower velocity. Families often introduce their young ones to the sport of firearms shooting—target shooting, plinking around the farm—with .22 rifles or air rifles, but a person can still lose their life from a .22. What, then, are we trying to achieve? What arguments and evidence base has the Home Office used to advance these provisions? I do not think they have any, and neither do sporting enthusiasts throughout the country. There has never been any discernible or detected use of rifles of this calibre, legally held, in the commission of a crime.

Some mention was made of the Northern Ireland provisions that allow us to access handguns and other firearms that people cannot access in the rest of the UK. That is true. Several Members of this House are in that position. Every time a person purchases a firearm of that capacity—handgun size, whether a 9 mm, a .40 calibre, a .45 ACP, or whatever—they must first apply for permission and show justifiable grounds for having one and then, shortly after purchasing it, hand it in to the police. They then take it away and put it through forensics and ballistics testing so that if that legally held and approved firearm were ever used and in the commissioning of, or during, a crime and the case left where it was used, the ballistics report would tell the police that it was that person’s firearm.
Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Of course, the hon. Gentleman was about to say that it is also subject to a ministerial decision only if the person fails to satisfy the conditions earlier in the process. The right hon. Gentleman served as a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office and has regularly and routinely seen the constraints and strictures, and how strenuous is the process to ensure that only appropriately approved people have access to firearms and in an appropriate way. The Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 and the guidance from the NIO outline the conditions under which a person can make an application.

The important point, however, is that the ballistics and forensics evidence is there for those firearms. The same process could be applied to these circumstances. The approach in the Bill is to constrain access to 13,600 joules of energy—to use the term in the Bill—coming from a firearm. A similar forensics report could be made of that firearm and held by the state so that should that legally held firearm ever be used in the commissioning of crime, which has never happened before, the state would know whose weapon it was. It would be very simple, and I suggest that it should be considered in Committee as a further step to strengthen the existing provisions.

Let me make another point, on which I know I will have no support from Conservative Members. In Northern Ireland, no one can have an air rifle unless it is registered on a firearms certificate. An air rifle can be a deadly weapon. It may be a .177, it may take a small slug, it may operate through the force of air rather than black powder, but it can still be a lethal weapon. Air rifles are not even registered on firearms certificates in England. However, we are imposing serious restrictions on sporting pursuits which I think are unnecessary.

I have canvassed the Minister on the bump stock proposal, and I accept the argument that has been advanced. I think it absolutely right that bump stocks cannot be used in this country, and that the Bill allows the police to seize them. That is a fair argument, and one that we support. As the Minister will know, it has been argued that MARS rifles are useful to disabled shooters, giving access to the sport to those who have trouble handling bolts. I accept that, so far, none of the Paralympic shooting organisations—or, indeed, any of the national shooting organisations—have produced any evidence to substantiate that argument, but I trust that it will be considered later in the Bill’s passage.

We need to engage in very productive consideration. What are the reasons, what are the root causes, and how do we address the fears that are associated with some of these items? I have talked about the money that has just been invested in the .50 calibre range at Silverstone, which was specifically designed to be a safe environment for the use of such rifles, but they will certainly not be used regularly in gangland crimes. We are talking about a rifle weighing 30 lb, which will cost £3,000 or £4,000. The Minister is well aware of some of the historic issues that have arisen in Northern Ireland when paramilitaries have had access to such weapons, but they were never legally held, they were never on a firearms certificate, and they are not what we should be considering today. We are talking about the lawful pursuit of interest in a sport. That is something that we should support, something that forms part of our Olympics set-up, and something that we, as a country, fund participants to engage in, be involved in, and represent our country in. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) knows David Calvert very well. Calvert is a Commonwealth Games and Olympics shooter and gold medallist from Northern Ireland, who excels in the sport.

As a Parliament, we want our society to be safe. As a Parliament, we recognise that regulation is necessary. As a Parliament, we recognise that we should take steps to ensure that anyone who has access to something that is potentially lethal is controlled and monitored, and that there are systems in place to ensure that it is as safe as it can possibly be. However, in the absence of any rationale or evidence to justify this change, I think that it is a step too far.

I welcome the Minister’s willingness to engage with the issue, and I welcomed the Secretary of State’s indication at the start of the debate that he would engage in thoughtful consideration in the weeks ahead. I look forward to playing whatever part I can on the periphery of the Committee to help to improve the Bill.

6.38 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): This has been a wide-ranging and, on the whole, thoughtful debate. There is agreement across the House on the broad themes of the Bill: the prohibition of the sale of corrosive substances to under-18s and the prohibition of the dispatch of bladed products and corrosive substances to residential addresses. I think it right that the Government are tackling the issue of online sales, and, more generally, the sale and possession of acid and knives. We want to ensure that death stars and zombie knives, which have no purpose other than to cause harm, are no longer a problem on our streets.

I counted no fewer than 20 Back-Bench speeches today, I pay particular tribute to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who focused on corrosive substances and referred to the 85 attacks that had taken place in Newham. She rightly drew attention to the physical and emotional impact of such attacks on victims. She spoke with her usual knowledge and passion, and I pay tribute to her for her sustained campaigning on this issue.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for his speech. He focused on corrosive substances, and brought his technical knowledge to bear on his analysis of the Bill and set out a number of useful suggestions that I hope will be taken into account as the Bill moves into Committee, not least the fact that the Home Office does not collect national statistics on acid attacks, and it would be very useful if it chose to do so. It is important—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) the shadow policing Minister made this point in her opening remarks—to review the list of substances that require a licence for purchase, because that will surely evolve in the months and years to come. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham drew attention to the fact that police cuts have absolutely had consequences that should be acknowledged.
I pay tribute to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who said that it was essential that we protect shop workers, who are on the very frontline of the sale of some of these products. I thank the Home Secretary for his positive reaction to that intervention, and I hope that that will be looked at in Committee.

While we welcome the broad thrust of the Bill, it is of course on its own not enough; we need to look at this issue in a broader context. I have said previously in the House that adequate resourcing on its own is not sufficient, but it certainly is necessary. Ministers must acknowledge that it cannot be said that police numbers are irrelevant. We have seen that in a leaked Home Office document—we know that that is the advice that has been given—which says:

“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.

That is the advice Ministers have been given. I know they say that they never comment on leaks, but if they have not seen this document they should be asking for it, and they should come clean on the impact that the cuts to our police have had on the rise in serious and violent crime. It is not only the 21,000 fewer police officers that have had an impact, so have the 18,000 fewer support staff and the 6,800 fewer community support officers.

I also draw attention to the wider austerity context, and the impact that has had across our public services, not least on youth services in England. There has been a substantial reduction in the number of youth workers, which has clearly had an impact on our young people. Work needs to be done across government to look at whether those leaving care, as well as those who are homeless and those who are excluded from school, receive appropriate support. It is a great shame that central Government funding for youth offending teams has been reduced from £145 million in 2010-11 to just £72 million in 2017-18. That clearly has an impact on the ability of our young people to make a new life for themselves and move away from a potential life of offending.

A number of the contributions across the House made it clear that multi-agency working is important, and it absolutely is, but multi-agency working can only be effective if all those agencies are properly funded and resourced. They can all make a contribution to what is a much broader problem in this context.

We must not forget the situation in which this debate takes place, because there are some sobering statistics on violent crime in our country. The number of violent offences is now more than 1.3 million, compared with just 709,000 in 2009. There were nearly 40,000 offences involving a knife or a sharp instrument in the year ending December 2017. That is a 22% increase on the previous year. There were well over 6,500 firearms offences last year—an 11% increase on the previous year. All those statistics give greater urgency to the need for the House to act, and yes, the Bill is certainly part of that. We have made it absolutely clear that the tightening of the law in respect of acid and knives is welcome, but if the Government were to simply stop here and assume that the Bill will do everything, I fear that they would be mistaken.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham described speaking to someone in his constituency, and he made it absolutely clear that this issue should be looked at in a broader context. Unless, together with the Bill, there is serious funding for the agencies that provide the necessary support to our young people and people right across our society, this legislation will not be as effective as it needs to be. Above all, we must think now about all those people who have been injured and had their lives adversely affected by the terrible attacks on our streets. The debate today has on the whole been positive, and it has recognised what people have gone through. Let us now take the Bill into Committee and provide improvements where needed to ensure that it is effective, and that it is matched by the necessary resources.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members across the House for their contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) said that this had been a constructive and thoughtful debate—that is sadly too rare in this House—and I agree with him. Colleagues have made considered contributions, and it is clear that there is much common ground between us. The fact is that we all want this violent crime to stop, and the Bill is a tool with which the Government, and I hope Members across the House, are trying to tackle this serious issue.

It is apparent that everyone is committed to tackling violent crime head on, and rightly so. Recorded knife and gun crimes are on the increase, and hon. Members will know the devastating impact that those crimes have on communities across the country, not just in London. Before I go on to deal with the Bill, it is worth reflecting on why the legislation is necessary. From the teenage son stabbed to death outside a shop in Camden and the 15-year-old killed in Romford at the weekend to the man in Liverpool whose arm was severed by a machete in a county lines punishment and the fatal stabbings in Wolverhampton, and Sheffield—all those crimes and many more in every part of the country have left behind them grieving families and devastated communities. I consider meeting the victims and the grieving families of these terrible crimes to be one of the most important parts of my role. It is an essential part of my job, and that is why, when I stand here at the Dispatch Box, I speak not just from my notes but from the heart. It is for those people that I am helping the Government to take this legislation through.

We are clear that this is just a part of our strategy to tackle serious violence. We published the serious violence strategy in April, and its emphasis is on the themes that we have heard so much about today. It is about early intervention, about prevention and about the community drawing together and relying on local partners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said. It is about us working together and seeing this not just as a law enforcement issue, important though that is, but as a societal issue as well. The measures in the Bill will strengthen the powers available to the police to
deal with such crimes. When a family has suffered a terrible crime, they want to feel that the police have the powers they need to bring the offenders to justice. The measures will not solve all crimes involving knives, guns and corrosives, but they are important. We must pursue and prosecute those who commit violent crimes. The Bill gives the police and others the powers they need to do so.

The corrosives measures in the Bill will help to stop young people getting hold of dangerous corrosives and are supported by interested businesses. They build on the voluntary arrangements already in place and will close down the sale of acids to under-18s, both online and offline. The Bill also creates an offence of possession of a corrosive in a public place so that police can take additional action to prevent acid attacks. We know that gang members decant corrosive substances into water bottles to evade detection. This measure gives the police the powers they need.

Other measures will help to stop young people getting hold of knives online. That is a major concern of the communities and charities we have worked with in drawing together the serious violence strategy. We know that such sales have led to knives being used in crime. I have seen some of the knives on sale online. As colleagues on both sides of the House have said, they have no practical use; they are clearly designed to glamorise violence and encourage criminality, and are promoted as such.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is right about the sale on the internet of those weapons, but the internet has other malevolent influences on young people. Several hon. Members raised the issue of social media and its glamorisation of violence. Will she work with others to clamp down on those people who allow those images and messages to be broadcast to vulnerable young people?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Not just for the concise and clear points he made in his contribution but for the poetry that he always brings to our debates.

My hon. Friend the Members for Solihull and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) also made the point about social media. That is why the Home Office serious violence strategy is funding the social media hub pilot, which will give the Metropolitan police the powers they need to work with social media companies to bring those videos down. I have seen drill videos; they are horrific and they need to stop.

The measures on the possession of offensive weapons give the police the powers they need to act when people have flick knives, zombie knives and other offensive weapons that have absolutely no place in our homes.

A number of colleagues mentioned clause 28, which is on high-energy rifles. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said at the start of the debate that we will listen to colleagues’ concerns. I reiterate that this is not an attack on rural sports; it is a response to the threat assessment of the National Crime Agency and the police.

Given the strong concerns expressed, I will take a moment to explain how clause 28 came into being. For those who are not familiar with such weapons, they are very large and heavy firearms that can shoot very large distances. One example I have been given is that they can shoot the distance between London Bridge and Trafalgar Square—some 3,500 metres. I can share with the House the fact that there has been a recent increase in seizures at the United Kingdom border of higher-powered weaponry and ordnance. The assessment is that those weapons were destined for the criminal marketplace, and that the criminal marketplace is showing a growing demand for more powerful weaponry.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will my hon. Friend take an intervention?

Victoria Atkins: I will finish my point if I may. That is the background against which we are operating. Having received such an assessment, we must consider it with great care. We have a duty to consider it and to protect the public. I gently correct the suggestion that such high-energy rifles have not been used in crime. As the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) said, high-energy rifles were used in the 1990s during the troubles to kill people who were charged with securing Northern Ireland. We are listening, and, as I hope colleagues saw, I sat through the vast majority of the debate. Those and other issues will be addressed in the conversations that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and all the ministerial team will have with colleagues on both sides of the House.

I must pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who has devoted a great deal of time and energy not just to the Bill but to protecting our young people and tackling serious violence.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Minister acknowledge that, even assuming the Bill makes it to the statute book, we will not tackle this problem unless the Mayor of London and other police and crime commissioners take it very seriously and ensure that they hold their police to account, set objectives for them and ensure that they deliver on this crucial work, as they did when my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) successfully got crime levels down?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Indeed she and my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) all focused on the importance of local policing and local leadership in policing. We introduced police and crime commissioners to enable local people to have the power to influence policing in their local area. Of course, I very much enjoy working with the Mayor of London and, as far as we are concerned, more power to his elbow when it comes to local policing.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend will have heard the widespread concern in many different parts of the United Kingdom. She seems to want to ban these big-calibre weapons solely on the basis that they might get into the hands of a criminal or a terrorist. If that is the case, rather than ban them why does she not adopt my suggestion of improving the secure places where such weapons have to be held? There should be all the security, with the weapons checked in and out, to make stealing them much more difficult.
Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his contribution. He and I have been in constant conversation about this for some time. He will forgive me for not committing to changing the Bill on the Floor of the House, but we are in listening mode. Indeed, I was in listening mode when my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made a typically robust but thoughtful contribution, and it may be that we work together on looking into that.

Lyn Brown: I urge the hon. Lady to be firm on the issue of guns and gun control. She is loquacious on being in listening mode, so will she answer my question on scheduling? She has only a couple of minutes left, and I hope she will get to it.

Victoria Atkins: That is literally the next thing on my to-do list. The hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) are both relentless campaigners on corrosive substances, and I have taken on board her point about adults supplying corrosive substances to children. I will look into it, and perhaps there are already laws to cover it.

The substances in schedule 1 have been included on the basis of recommendations provided by our scientific advisers at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, which provides science and technology advice to the Government. We have tried to ensure that Parliament can scrutinise the list, which is why it is in the Bill, but there is of course capacity to change and add to the schedule through regulation.

I am cantering through, but I am grateful for the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), who brought his mental health expertise to the Chamber and showed the complexity of the issues we face, and of the right hon. Member for East Ham—I know he is interested in banning sales to under-21s, but we do not feel we have the mechanisms to do that.

I am grateful to all colleagues who have emphasised that this is not just an urban issue but a rural issue, too. There is real intent on both sides of the House to deal with this, and I note that colleagues believe social media and internet companies should join us in our determination. That message is coming out loud and clear from this Government, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83 A (7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Offensive Weapons Bill:

Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 13 September 2018.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Procedings 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.—

Kelly Tolhurst.

Question agreed to.

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS 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 Offensive Weapons Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of compensation in respect of surrendered weapons, firearms and ancillary equipment.—

Kelly Tolhurst.

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Before I proceed to the next business, I have now to announce a correction to the result of today’s deferred Division. There must have been a miscount by those who attend to these matters. In respect of the Question relating to healthcare and associated professionals, the Ayes were 465, not 467, and the Noes were 2, so the Ayes have it.

Business without Debate

SELECT COMMITTEE PRACTICE AND PROCEDURE (EFFECTIVE WORKING)

Motion made,

That this House approves the recommendations of the Liaison Committee in its First Report of 2017-19 (HC 922); and accordingly orders that:

(1) Standing Order No. 137A be amended by adding the following sub-paragraph to paragraph (1): “(c) to invite members of any other committee to which this order applies to attend any meeting and, at the discretion of the chair, ask questions of witnesses or otherwise participate in its proceedings; but no member of another committee so invited may move any motion or amendment, vote or count towards the quorum.”;

and

(2) until the end of this Session, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 125 (Select committees (admission of the public)), the chair of a select committee may, with leave of that committee, be accompanied at meetings other than oral evidence sessions by a single, nominated member of his or her personal staff, subject to any further conditions set from time to time by any resolution of the Liaison Committee; and those conditions must include provision for the exclusion of any such person if any member of that committee indicates objection at any time.—

Kelly Tolhurst.

Hon. Members: Object.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope you can provide some guidance on how the record might be corrected in relation to remarks made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North
(Kirsty Blackman) a short while ago in a Westminster Hall debate on coastal erosion. The hon. Lady said that my local authority, Angus Council, had not committed to use the full funding provided for the purpose of protecting against coastal erosion, and she went on to make a series of disparaging connected remarks. Angus Council has now written to the hon. Lady to inform her that those remarks were wrong and that it has in fact committed all the moneys it has received from the Scottish Government’s capital funding to flood-risk management actions. The council has requested an explanation as to her remarks, but could you, Mr Speaker, advise me as to how the record can be corrected in this place?

Mr Speaker: Well, as I think the puckish grin on the hon. Lady’s face testifies, she realises that she has found her own salvation: she has in her own terms corrected the record in respect of those important matters. I detect a glow of contentment on her part, as she has achieved her objective by the tried and tested ruse of an entirely bogus point of order. I hope that satisfies her for now.

Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust: Governance

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

7.3 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): At the beginning of this year, it was announced that the chair of the Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Ian Johnson, would be stepping down at Easter. I had always found him approachable and helpful in my regular meetings with him to discuss the trust’s work. For the avoidance of doubt, I should say that although the trust is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is sitting on the Government Front Bench, it covers not just my constituency and his, but those of the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith).

When it was subsequently announced that Mr Johnson had applied to become chair of the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay Foundation Trust, I was mildly surprised, but thought nothing more of it. I was then interested, as I am sure others were—this was sent to myself and neighbouring MPs—to receive an email from the secretary of the trust encouraging us to go forward and talk about the process for Mr Johnson’s successor. I had no inkling then of the sequence of events that would lead me to seek this Adjournment debate.

What started to concern me about the circulation of this information was the extraordinarily short period of time that we were given. I did write to the secretary of the trust to ask why we had not been given earlier notice of the facts. When I found out that the advertisement had been placed in The Times, the date for the application was 16 April, which was within a very short period of time. I said that I would like more details on the shortlisting, the interviews and the interviewing panel. I said that I was sure that the trust would understand how important it was that there should be a strong transparency in the trust at such a critical point at this time. I got a slightly thin but soothing note from Michael Hearty, a governor of the trust, who announced himself as the chair of the nominations committee. He said:

“Let me first of all reassure you about the openness and transparency of the current Chair recruitment process.”

He took me through the process, and he did indeed confirm that it would be very speedy. He said that a long list of candidates had been presented to the nominations committee, but the list was not actually very long. It was a list of only eight, which makes me wonder why all the candidates were not interviewed.

There was then a very short process of presentations to stakeholders and final interviews. I wrote back to the governor and said that I thought there were still “serious questions” to be answered, particularly about the fact that there was no information about the closing date for applications. I asked him whether he would list the members of the nominations committee, and said that I was concerned that it had taken a week to provide me with merely a basic timeline regarding some of the questions that I had asked.
The second letter that I received from the governor was written in a rather smooth but slightly condescending fashion. He said:

“I am disappointed that my original response did not provide you with all the assurances that you were seeking and, as a consequence, you have found the need to ask further questions.”

As for the advertising of the process, he said that it was the first time that the trust had taken such a step, and that, in view of the progression, it thought that it would be open and transparent to let people know about it. He said:

“I am sure you will recognise its circulation as a well-intentioned act”,

although the closing date was an obvious piece of detail that could have been included in the original email.

At this point, I began to think of the old proverb that says:

“The louder he talked of his honour, the faster we counted our spoons.”

I said to the governor in response that I did not think that this was very transparent. I asked him who had appointed the nominations committee, and he told me that it was appointed by the governors. I am still at a loss to understand why the shortlisting involved such a hurry.

The other thing that bothered me was the inclusion of the chief executive of the trust, Wendy Swift, on the nominations committee. I laid out my concerns in an email to fellow MPs that I sent to them on 16 May, in which I said:

“the inclusion of the Chief Executive on that Committee, which effectively has overseen all aspects of this process, has prepared the short list of candidates and will presumably make a recommendation to Governors this Friday. I believe that to give any Chief Executive so prominent a role overseeing that process, as opposed to that person perfectly reasonably but separately giving thoughts and feedback to it, could be seen as anomalous in the context of the necessary future relationship of the new Chair to the Chief Exec.

I said that I had

taken these steps to question what has gone on (with some reluctance and I think for the first time in my 20-years relationship with the Trust)

because of my real concerns for the procedure, not for the individuals, because at that stage neither I nor anybody else knew who had applied or been shortlisted.

I then looked at the constitution of the trust and the manual of the council of governors. That manual made it very clear that the chief executive was not automatically one of the members of the committee. The role of the council of governors is, of course, to hold the executive to account, so the chief executive could have acted in an advisory capacity, but not as a member. The trust’s constitution said that she should be a member, so both of them could not be correct.

I wrote again to Mr Hearty on 17 May and said that the council of governors is

“responsible for establishing the Nominations Committee”.

I said that it is very clear that the chair’s appointment is its responsibility and that

“The only reference to the Chief Executive occurs in the section on Attendance at the Nominations Committee...It does not give any licence to the Chief Executive to sit as a fully-fledged member...determining all the processes, shortlisting candidates”

and so on. I asked him therefore to think very carefully as to whether this process should be “paused and recalibrated” because I believed that there was a significant danger that the clear protocols in the governors’ manual had been breached.

Well, he did not do that. In fact, an email was then sent by Sue Crouch, the lead governor, saying that although the constitution clearly indicated that the chief executive should be a member of the nominations committee, given the feedback from governors, Wendy had graciously offered to withdraw in the best interest of the process. But, of course, by that time she had taken part in three quarters of the process, and whether it was a gracious withdrawal or otherwise, I have no knowledge. That was not a very good situation.

I had become concerned about the situation with the trust and had therefore written to NHS Improvement to ask the same sorts of questions on what its role should be. I initially got back a letter from the director for the north region, Lyn Simpson, who said that NHS Improvement is not involved in the recruitment of chairs of foundation trusts, which, of course, was not what I had asked her. She said that the trust had given its assurances that this recruitment process was in line with the constitution, as well as open, transparent and governor-led, but she did not give any grounds for that advice.

I went back to Lyn Simpson, reminding her that I had had guidance from the House of Commons Library that foundation trusts are accountable to Monitor, which is now part of NHS Improvement. I had looked at the code of governance published by Monitor, which specifically referred to the appointment of chair, so I asked her to respond more fully. She did respond again, but said that there was no legal basis on which NHS Improvement could intervene in the appointment of a foundation trust chair. I did not find that very acceptable, but I did note that she said that Dr Kirkup’s recent governance report, published in February 2018, had highlighted the role that NHS Improvement plays in board appointments as “not sufficiently clear.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Quite clearly, if procedure has not been followed, as the hon. Gentleman has outlined, surely at some stage he has to refer this case to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. That must be a way of getting action given that this procedure has not been followed.

Gordon Marsden: It might be, but I am hoping that the Minister might be able to make some comments on these issues today, because NHS Improvement has to fulfil its duties under legislation, and I do not believe that it has done that very well.

I received another letter expressing pleasure that the trust had responded positively with the concerns on the point that I had raised, but that was really a question of shutting the door after the horse had bolted, for the reasons that I have explained. I then wrote again, asking for a response from Mr Hearty. I did not get that, but I did get a reply from Sue Crouch, who told me about the meeting to confirm the candidate who was going to be presented. That candidate turned out to be Mr Pearse Butler, who coincidentally had just stepped down as chair of the Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, to which the former chair of the Blackpool trust was about to go. I finally got to see the minutes of the
process, and I was told that the discussion panels had worked well but that there had been a difference of opinion about the candidates.

I was also then told by a number of people that the proceedings at the confirmation were rather irregular. According to governors, not only did Michael Hearty ignore the request from three governors for a secret vote, but he said that abstentions would count as a yes vote, which struck me as a rather strange position. For obvious reasons, and because the trust has larded around a lot of “confidential” and “highly confidential” on various things, I am not going to name the governors who have spoken to me, although they are perfectly prepared to talk to people about it. I will just quote what one governor said:

“A few governors, including the Chief executive were involved in the recruitment process. The rest of the Governors were asked to attend presentations and panels as part of the recruitment process. I requested, on a number of occasions, the criteria and weighting for the presentations and the panels, including set questions. These were not sent. At the presentations, pieces of paper were presented on which we could make unstructured comments. These were supposed to be weighted, however there was no...criteria to do so...Candidate were questioned at each panel. No questions were pre set in advance...We were asked to choose a candidate based on the activities. There was disagreement from a number of people...about the preferred candidate for Chair...At the council of governors meeting called to ratify the appointment there was discussion about the process and the selection. A paper ballot was refused and a show of hands insisted on.”

I have a further comment from someone who will again remain nameless, but was a senior manager at Blackpool Vic and in other organisations in the past. He wrote to me to say that the council of governors had always been viewed as an inconvenient necessity rather than a valued part of the trust governance arrangement. I found that very disturbing and concerning.

One might have thought at that stage that the trust, and certainly the nominations committee, would have paused for thought, given all these criticisms from the governors, but we had the same process for the appointment of a new non-executive director, not the clinical director. Again, there were two panels of candidates, who again included the chief executive, Wendy Swift. I understand that the chair-designate was present on this occasion as well. Let us call the two candidates X and Y. Panel 1 had preferred candidate X by four votes to two, and panel 2 had gone for the same candidate unanimously, but the nominations committee had recommended candidate Y. It is not surprising, therefore, that many trust governors have so far not gone back to ratify this appointment in any shape or form.

Those are some of the issues that have come out of this, and I want to make one or two observations in conclusion. The chair of any health trust is crucial, particularly in the difficult circumstances in which the Blackpool trust finds itself: still requiring improvement, according to the Care Quality Commission, and hit hard by the strains of morbidity and the impacts of transience and demography, which put extra pressure on. We therefore need the process for the appointment of a chair or non-executive director to be as transparent and reaching-out as possible, not a cosy old pals act reinforced by groupthink. That is what has sometimes come up through the bureaucracy.

I am forced to conclude that the nominations committee thought that it could get away with evading proper scrutiny and transparency—that a thin veneer of irritated politeness attempting to conceal a determined effort to override public governors unless they were rubber-stamped, and indeed delaying so as to block out others such as myself from discussing things would do the trick. Well, it does not do the trick, and it is frankly an insult to all the hard-working staff who have worked their socks off in the past few months in recent crises at Blackpool Victoria Hospital.

The use of the words “confidential” and “highly confidential” by the lead governor, Sue Crouch, could be seen as an attempt to intimidate or gag governors who had legitimate concerns about the process. I am very concerned about that. As I say, I have circulated this letter to all my neighbouring MPs. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) is unable to be here today, but she asked specifically for me to indicate that she shares my concern about the governance of the hospital. I understand that the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who is also away from Parliament, has said that he has a number of issues with the governance.

I ask the Minister to reflect on whether we need some form of inquiry into the process that went on at the Blackpool trust. I can assure him that some of the governors who have shared the concerns that I have are prepared to give evidence on that. We need some clarity as to the role of NHS Improvement, because it is supposed to be a backstop to addressing both stakeholder and individual concerns, but in this instance it seemed too ready to accept the version of events from the people who had convened all this and the way they wanted it to go.

The principle that governors should not feel pressured or fettered is very important. If the Government want to encourage democratic involvement in the NHS—a real people’s NHS in its 70th year—there is a lot more to do to support and enable people to secure those rights of representation. Members of Parliament who raise legitimate issues of transparency should be able to get proper answers.

I have no idea whether Mr Pearse Butler, who was announced as the new chair on 18 May, will be a good, bad or indifferent chair of the trust, but I am clear that the process by which he was appointed was deeply flawed and not transparent.

7.19 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): May I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for securing the debate? I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) in his place, and I know that both my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) have expressed an interest in the issue.

The issues raised by the hon. Member for Blackpool South are clearly a cause for concern. While the CQC has not identified any governance issues in the trust, it is clear that the recruitment process for the new chair had a number of irregularities. One of the defining features of our approach to the NHS since the Francis report has been a willingness to face up to difficult issues. I therefore welcome the opportunity to focus on these irregularities and will address each in turn.
The previous chair of the trust resigned in January 2018 to take up the role of chair in another, nearby foundation trust, University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay. That caused a recruitment process for the chair of Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to commence in February this year. Autonomy in appointing executives is an important NHS foundation trust freedom. As a foundation trust, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has the freedom to determine many of its own policies and procedures, including those relating to the appointment of a new chair.

The process followed by Blackpool is explained in the trust’s own constitution, which sets out the make-up of the nominations committee responsible for senior appointments. That committee is made up of six individuals, including the chair, or another senior role if the chair is the position being recruited for, as well as three governors and the chief executive. The sixth member is an independent assessor—in this case, the chair from another foundation trust, Salford Royal.

This is where the first irregularity arises. NHS Improvement guidance states that a foundation trust’s chief executive should not be permitted to vote on the appointment of the chair to whom he or she will be accountable. However, in this case, the chief executive was on the nominations committee for this role. While she did not breach the guidance, it is clear to me that if a chief executive should not vote on the appointment of the chair, it follows that a chief executive should also not be involved earlier in the appointments process, given the relationship of accountability that exists between chief executives and chairs of NHS trusts and foundation trusts.

However, I recognise that that instruction was deep within guidance dating from 2012, and there have been other pieces of NHSI guidance for foundation trusts regarding their governance arrangements that did not contain similar advice. There is an expectation that advice and guidance given to NHS trusts is clear and understandable. I have been informed that guidance on this topic is being refreshed by NHSI as part of the review of NHSI’s role in board appointments following Dr Kirkup’s findings in relation to Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust, to which the hon. Member for Blackpool South referred, and I have asked for the lessons learned to be fed into that refresh.

The chief executive did voluntarily stand back from the process after concerns were raised by the hon. Gentleman regarding her involvement. That was before the final interview was held for any of the candidates. Though it might be fair to ask whether involving the chief executive in the recruitment of the chair was the wisest course of action, it was within the trust’s constitution.

The second irregularity is the response from NHSI to the hon. Gentleman’s letter of 3 May. NHSI recognised that the role it plays in board appointments is an important part of the overall appointments process, appears to have been rushed in this instance. There are clearly lessons to be learned, and I will be working with NHSI to ensure that its guidance is refreshed, and that it is clear in its advice to foundation trusts and trusts about the importance of local engagement.

The hon. Gentleman’s letter to the trust of 17 May referenced the trust’s council manual, pointing out that it did not include any reference to the chief executive sitting on the nominations panel. This document sits under the constitution of the trust, and I am satisfied that the explicit rules addressing this matter in the constitution have been followed. I have today received a personal assurance from the trust chief executive, Wendy Swift, that the trust will review its constitution to remove any ambiguity in respect of the appointment of the chair and non-executive directors.

Just to reassure the hon. Gentleman, I will read directly from that letter to me:

“I would like to reassure you that we had already taken a decision to review our Constitution to remove any ambiguity in respect of the appointment of the Chair and Non-Executive Directors.”

I will happily share that letter with the hon. Gentleman.

The independent assessor on the panel was the chair of Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust. He agreed as to the candidate recommended by the nominations committee’s interview panel to the council of governors, and has not raised objections about how the process to recruit the new chair was run. I have had a personal assurance from the chief executive that there has been no contact between her and the chair of Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, and that she has not in any way tried to influence the decision-making process leading to the chair’s appointment.

The chief executive’s letter to me, dated 27 June—it might be helpful to the House if I quote it—goes on:

“I did know the new Chair on a professional basis prior to his appointment. We have worked within the same Health Economy for a number of years and attended the same strategic meetings and events. For clarity, the Chair was the Chief Executive of the Strategic Health Authority (2002-2006) whilst I was the Chief Executive of Blackpool PCT. After 2006, there were no personal or professional links until the Chair was appointed as the Chair of the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS FT (2014-2018).”

It is clearly difficult to reconcile the involvement of chief executives in the process of selecting chairs with principles of good governance. This appointment took place under the system of foundation trust autonomy put in place under successive Governments, and is a matter for the foundation trusts themselves. However, NHSI recognises that the role it plays in board appointments, both executive and non-executive, is not sufficiently clear and that there would be benefit in reviewing and codifying its oversight and support arrangements.
While any such changes should pay due regard to the fact that autonomy in appointing executives is an important NHS foundation trust freedom, I assure the House that I will be working with NHSI to ensure that the irregularities regarding this appointment do not occur in the future.

The hon. Gentleman has done the House a service in highlighting the clear irregularities in respect of this appointment. I hope that my response goes some way to reassuring him that NHSI will work with the Department to ensure that further irregularities do not occur.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Division

HEALTHCARE AND ASSOCIATED PROFESSIONS

That the draft Nursing and Midwifery (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 17 May, be approved.

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Mim
Ali, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amesbury, Mike
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Antoniazi, Tonya
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Akins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barrow, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Belts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bolsover, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowen, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brennan, Kevin
Breer, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooks, Paul, rh James
Brown, Lyn
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burton, Richard
Burns, Conor
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartwright, James
Cash, rh Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chapman, Jenny
Chalambous, Bamboos
Chishti, Reham
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleveley, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Coyle, Neil
Crabb, rh Stephen
Creagh, Mary
Crouch, Tracey
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*Question accordingly agreed to.*
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Exports in Global Markets

1. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote UK exports in global markets.

5. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote UK exports in global markets.

6. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to promote UK exports in global markets.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Mr Speaker, before I begin, I am delighted to announce the appointment of Mark Slaughter as the Department for International Trade’s new director general for investment. Mark took up his new role this month and will lead the Department’s work on inward and outward investment.

The Department for International Trade provides support to companies in Wales and the rest of the UK through, for example, the GREAT campaign, high value campaigns, the Tradeshows Access Programme and the financial support to exporters offered by UK Export Finance.

Ian C. Lucas: Wrexham pharmaceutical companies, such as Wockhardt and Ipsen Biopharm, export worldwide. Does the Minister agree that it is essential to preserve regulatory alignment to allow them to continue to export and develop in new markets?

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who is a great champion of his local exporting businesses. We need the right arrangements going forward to support the strong export growth we have seen. He will note that, since 2010, export growth for Wales has gone up by 82%.

Paula Sherriff: What direct support is being given to businesses that want to export overseas and, crucially, how is it being signposted?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is right to mention the importance of ensuring that British companies know support is in place. In DIT, we have for the first time in our history a Department of State whose only job is to support international economic exports, investment and trade policy. The GREAT campaign has been very significant in promoting that and we have trade advisers throughout the country. Indeed, in Yorkshire and Humber, DIT has 33 mobile and desk-based international trade advisers, who are there explicitly to support local business and to make sure they know what we have on offer.

Mr Sweeney: For the food and drink producers located in my constituency, such as the world famous Tennants brewery and Morrison Bowmore whisky distillery, international trade is an integral part of their business. Can the Minister tell us what his Department is doing to work with Scottish Development International to better promote Scottish businesses, such as the ones I have mentioned, overseas?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right and, along with many of his colleagues, he is a great champion of local businesses. That is why it was particularly disappointing that we saw so many of his colleagues shaking their heads in disbelief when they heard the shadow Secretary of State the other day refusing to support the EU-Canada trade deal and refusing to support the EU-Japan trade deal. He will recall that one of his colleagues said that if the Labour party is not prepared to support a deal with Trudeau’s Canada, who on earth would it support a deal with.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Although it is very welcome to see a rise in exports, Ministers know they are still coming from a relatively small proportion of British businesses. I urge him to challenge business membership bodies to ensure they put exporting at the heart of their work. We need a culture change. They have a role to play.

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work he does in supporting international trade. He is absolutely right. We work closely in partnership with, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets regularly, representative business organisations because we need to change the culture. Our assessment is that there are more British companies that could export and do not, than there are who can and do. The opportunity is there. The very welcome growth in exports over recent
years is to be applauded, but there is so much more we can do by working in partnership not only with representative business organisations, but with banks.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What impact will there be on UK firms exporting around the world if the Trade Bill is not implemented before we leave the EU?

Graham Stuart: Of course, the Trade Bill is fundamental to the continuity of existing EU trade deals. It puts in place the framework to allow us to move them over from the EU to the UK. Labour failed earlier this week to support jobs, and it has repeatedly voted against the very Bill that would allow us to ensure continuation of trade.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Our exports will be more likely to prosper if reciprocal trade is not met with a common external tariff, will they not?

Graham Stuart: What my right hon. Friend is absolutely right about is that there will be real opportunities for the UK when it leaves the EU. The appetite throughout the world is first for continuity, but among so many of our existing trade partners there is also a real desire to deepen that relationship and thus support British exports in a way that, sadly, the shadow Secretary of State seems signal not to do.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is not enough, though, simply to promote exports and global trade. They need to be facilitated, which is likely to require new trade deals with our major trading partners, such as the United States. That, however, is not without its risks. When the Minister and the Secretary of State are going about their business promoting trade and starting early discussions about a trade deal, will they make it clear from the outset that our NHS, our public services, our food hygiene rules and important geographic indicators are off limits and out of bounds?

Graham Stuart: I am happy to give those assurances, but earlier this week we saw the Scottish National party—the hon. Gentleman’s party, under his leadership in this area—vote against a deal that fully supports the continuity of existing protections. It is interesting that the Scotch Whisky Association and all the thousands who work in the Scotch whisky business strongly support that deal, whereas the SNP opposed it.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): In May it was reported that the Department was to axe hundreds of jobs in trade promotion—up to 10% of the workforce. The Treasury has since hinted that additional funding is available to safeguard such jobs, but we have heard that the cuts are still happening. Surely the Secretary of State agrees that axing officials whose job it is to promote British exports is not the best way to build a “global Britain”. Will he therefore confirm that his Department has not, and will not, cut those jobs?

Graham Stuart: The truth is that the Department is growing. It is less than two years old and it is building its capacity. Today I announced the appointment of a new director general for investment, we recently announced the appointment of a director general for exports, and, of course, we are soon to complete the appointments of eight HM trade commissioners around the world, who will deploy our resources to best effect.

Trade Deals with Developing Countries

2. Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of UK trade deals with developing countries on the economies of those countries.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): Freeing up trade is a proven driver of prosperity for developing countries. As we leave the EU, our priority will be to seek to deliver continuity in our trading arrangements, including continuity for developing countries.

Iain Stewart: Let me first warmly welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box.

The EU acts as a protectionist bloc against the trading interests of developing economies. Can my hon. Friend assure me that, once we leave the EU, arranging trade deals with developing economies will be a central part of our post-Brexit arrangements?

George Hollingbery: I certainly can. The Department’s White Paper “Preparing for our future trade policy” sets out the scale of the Government’s desire to help developing countries to break down the barriers to trade, and we will give them the tools with which to trade their way out of poverty.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that I did not spot the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but if he wants to shoehorn his question—

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): You look for your favourites.

Mr Speaker: I most certainly do not look for favourites, but I am always happy to hear from the hon. Gentleman, and if he wants to speak now, he can.

Mr Skinner: It was on the last question, and you know that.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can always shoehorn in his concern on any question, and the Chair is accommodating of him. I hope that his mood will improve as the day proceeds.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): An important issue connected with trade deals is actually a Home Office matter, I refer to the issue of visas. Whether the trade deals are with developing countries or with Australia and New Zealand, the big thing that they talk about is not two-year visas but five-year visas. What work is the Minister doing with the Home Office to bring some sense into this area? Incidentally, that is also needed on the west coast of Scotland in relation to fishing.

George Hollingbery: The hon. Gentleman will know very well that mode 4 is applied in many circumstances, and that it was part of the Japan-EU free trade deal. Our conversations with the Home Office are ongoing.
but it will always be a matter of national policy that we will control our own immigration system. Despite what is said in trade deals, that is protected.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, whatever agreement is or is not reached with the European Union, after Brexit this country will continue to see increased trade in goods and services with the European Union, developing countries, and other countries around the world?

**George Hollingbery** (Barnsley West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Clearly, the whole purpose of our leaving the European Union, or one of the plain purposes, is to increase sovereignty and to conduct our own trade deals. We are very keen to do a good deal with Europe—to see frictionless borders and to keep trade going on that front—and indeed to seek wide and ambitious free trade deals with others.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): What will the new Trade Minister do to ensure that any such trade deals with developing countries protect, promote and enhance workers’ rights, environmental protection and consumer rights, rather than engaging in a race to the bottom?

**George Hollingbery** (Barnsley West) (Lab): It is a feature of the free trade deal that is currently being signed by the European Union, and indeed the commitment of this Government, that chapters will be included in all those agreements that will protect exactly the elements that the hon. Lady identifies. They are in the current arrangements that we voted in favour of earlier this week and will be in future trade deals.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the best way of getting countries out of poverty is by trade, and that that is under threat from protectionism? Does he further agree that how we vote in this House, and the measures we support in the House on extending trade, matter?

**George Hollingbery** (Barnsley West) (Lab): That absolutely matters; it matters fundamentally. Trade is one of the greatest promoters of prosperity on the planet. It supports more poor people into reasonable states of living across the world than almost any other policy. The Opposition voted against such a free trade deal last week—in fact, against two of them. All that can do in the long run is reduce the amount of free trade around the world.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): For the last 10 to 15 minutes, Ministers at that Dispatch Box have been attacking us for voting on principle against a trade agreement the other day. I want to know how many trade deals the Government have turned down with Barnier and the rest of them across in Europe in the last 12 months. Answer!

**George Hollingbery** (Barnsley West) (Lab): I am very sorry to say, Mr Speaker, that I am not entirely sure that I understand the question, but I would like to correct one element of something I just said. Of course, the Opposition did not vote against both trade deals—they abstained on the Japan trade deal. I am afraid that I simply do not understand the question. All I know is that the trade deals that were voted on and passed by the House this week had elements that contained many of the protections that the Opposition have said that they want. There are chapters on labour rights and environmental standards, and there is protection for our public services, particularly the national health service, which, as I told the House on Tuesday, is protected from challenge by those agreements.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): What advice does the Minister have for small and medium-sized enterprises that want to do business both inside the EU and outside it, post 29 March next year, in terms of their geographic location? Does he think it would be a good idea for businesses to be based in Northern Ireland, where they can have the best of both worlds?

**George Hollingbery** (Barnsley West) (Lab): A characteristic of any trade deal that we wish to do with the EU will obviously be to look at the interests of small businesses, which are the lifeblood of our economy. The EU-Japan trade deal that we voted for in the House on Tuesday specifically opened up the markets of Japan to smaller and medium-sized producers in the car manufacturing sector. I hope that those sorts of measures will be reflected in any deal that we do with the EU.

### Business Investment Overseas

3. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses to invest overseas.

9. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses to invest overseas.

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade** (Dr Liam Fox): If I may, I would like to begin by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for all the work that he did as our Minister of State and for helping to set up the Department. He is one of the very best Ministers that I have had the honour to work with in my whole time in this House.

Since April 2017, the Department for International Trade has actively supported UK companies, with over 50 outward direct investment deals in over 20 countries. With our help, companies from all over the UK have invested overseas in many sectors, including advanced manufacturing, infrastructure and energy.

**Maria Caulfield**: Sussex sparkling wine is beating French champagne in Parisian wine-tasting challenges. In my constituency we have English sparkling wine producers such as Rathfinny, Ridgeview and Breaky Bottom. What steps is the Department taking to help this industry to invest and export overseas?

**Dr Fox**: I know that my hon. Friend is a great champion of English wines in her constituency. In fact, Aldwick Court in my own constituency makes a very fine range of wines. Mr Speaker—I will attempt to get you a bottle to prove the point. We work closely with leading industry associations and producers to help to support English wine exports. A recent example of this was the festival of innovation in March in Hong Kong.
Oral Answers
28 JUNE 2018

Our team in-market arranged a bespoke programme of briefings and a high-profile tasting session to introduce a delegation of UK wine and spirit producers to potential buyers from around the world, very successfully.

Mr Speaker: It all sounds very exciting, I must say.

Jim Shannon: The Secretary of State may not be aware of the input of a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister on this matter, but Lakeland Dairies in my constituency is attempting to secure Chinese business but is having some difficulty due to red tape. What support is available to help businesses across the language and cultural divide, and to gain results that benefit us all and in particular Lakeland Dairies in my constituency?

Dr Fox: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there have been a number of questions about the ease of doing business in China and market access has been one of the questions raised. A new trade commissioner has been appointed, Richard Burn, in China, and our team will work continually with the Chinese Government to try to remove some of the barriers. If companies in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency face specific problems, I will be delighted to meet him to try to resolve them.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last month, the Department’s roadshow that encourages small businesses to invest overseas and export visited Immingham in my constituency, and it was greatly valued by local businesses. Does the Department plan to continue and expand that roadshow?

Dr Fox: Of course, we will continue to do that; it is a very successful programme. But perhaps more usefully we can help to get small businesses the finance they require to get into the exporting business. Last year, in a change from the previous pattern, 78% of all the UK export finance agreements were done with small and medium-sized enterprises in this country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State looked at the impact of tariffs on British investments overseas?

Dr Fox: Tariffs in general are one of the areas we want to be able to look at when we leave the European Union. Of course the setting of tariffs is a legal power that we do not yet have. To be able to take full advantage of alternatives—reductions in tariffs, for example—this House will have to pass the customs Bill, which is coming back shortly. I hope that we can count on the hon. Gentleman’s support on that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Our proceedings would be incomplete and underperforming without a question from Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

May I ask the Secretary of State if he is not being a little complacent about the role of China in our manufacturing and other sectors? Does he realise that, when we encourage companies to export, some of the companies, like Syngenta in my constituency, are wholly owned by ChemChina and wholly owned subsidiaries of the communist Government in China? There is a greater number of British companies owned by the Chinese. Does that alter the sort of conversation he has with them?

Dr Fox: We believe in an open, liberal, global economy and, if we want to own companies overseas, countries overseas have to be able to own companies in this country. That is part of a liberal trading system, but that system requires a proper system of rules. That is why the World Trade Organisation needs to be strengthened and in some areas needs to be reformed, to ensure we have a global trading system that is fair and fit for all.

Trade and Road and Rail Infrastructure

4. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the potential merits for future UK trade of improved integration between road and rail infrastructure. [906138]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government’s transport investment strategy seeks to make Britain a more attractive place to trade and invest by improving the capacity and connectivity of Britain’s transport infrastructure. I know that, in my right hon. Friend’s own county, which has London Gateway, Tilbury and Harwich, she is a staunch campaigner for improved infrastructure and for more international trade and investment.

Priti Patel: To thrive as a global beacon for free trade, Britain has to have world-class infrastructure, so will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State work across Government to bring in road and rail upgrades, but also the introduction of free ports and enterprise zones in order to turbocharge business, trade and investment opportunities post Brexit?

Dr Fox: Well-connected transport infrastructure is key to our trading capability. When it comes to free ports, as my right hon. Friend knows, I am personally very well-disposed towards the concept. It is one area where we can take potential advantage when we have the freedom to do so once we have left the European Union.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If he has not already done so, will the Secretary of State raise the potential merits of Scottish inclusion in the HS2 project with the Secretary of State for Transport?

Dr Fox: Increased transport infrastructure will benefit all parts of the United Kingdom, and I would be happy to take up the hon. Gentleman’s case with the Transport Secretary at any time.

US Tariffs: EU Countermeasures

7. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the proportionality of the EU’s countermeasures to US tariffs on steel and aluminium. [906143]
The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): While we sympathise with US concerns regarding transparency and the overproduction of steel, we continue to argue that tariffs applied under section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act are not an appropriate solution for dealing with these issues. We will continue to seek a constructive, permanent resolution with the United States to avoid further escalation, which would only harm businesses, jobs and consumers in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Mr Sharma: After we have left the EU and turned our back on our trading partners, what steps will the Secretary of State's Department take to ensure that the UK can stand up to aggressive trade practices?

Dr Fox: Far from turning our back on any trading partners, we are seeking a full, transparent, comprehensive and liberal trading agreement with the European Union, and we will seek others. When it comes to protecting British industries, we can do that only when we have a trade remedies authority in place, and I have to remind the hon. Gentleman that he and his party voted against the Trade Bill, which establishes that authority.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State's reluctance to support EU countermeasures to combat Trump's trade war, and the Government's opposition to every amendment that we proposed to the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, speak volumes about his Government's true intentions. When will he give the trade remedies authority the board members it will need if it is to stand up for UK businesses and consumers? And when will he put an end to the impression that the UK's Secretary of State would rather back Donald Trump's policy of America first?

Dr Fox: That question was wrong on so many issues that I do not know where to start. Rather than being against countermeasures, the United Kingdom supported the European Union—as I have done several times in this House—in saying that we believed that what the United States did was incompatible with WTO law and that we were therefore against it. And it is the height of cheek to demand that the Government should put members on a board that the Labour party tried to prevent us from establishing in the first place.

Future Trade Agreements: Parliamentary Scrutiny

8. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will take steps to facilitate parliamentary scrutiny of future trade agreements.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that Parliament will have a critical role to play in scrutinising the UK's future trade deals. We will bring forward proposals in due course.

Gavin Newlands: The Trade Bill in its original form grants Ministers discretionary powers that undermine Parliament's right of scrutiny. There is no guarantee that agreements will be transposed as originally agreed by the EU, particularly in respect of quotas and tariffs. Given the oft-repeated mantra of taking back control, how can the Government justify not giving Parliament a say on these arrangements?

George Hollingbery: I know that the hon. Gentleman and others have tabled amendments to the Trade Bill. The details of our proposals on scrutiny will come forward in due course. The Government are committed to building a transparent and inclusive trade policy that is balanced against the need to ensure the confidentiality of negotiations. Any proposal that the Government bring forward will be on top of those mechanisms that are already at the disposal of Parliament. We will be consulting widely with the regions, and many of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman is articulating will be discussed in the regions of England and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Work has already commenced on talking some of these issues through with the devolved authorities.

Topical Questions

T1. [906146] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): 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 today to announce the appointment of Natalie Black, Emma-Wade Smith and Simon Penney as our new Trade Commissioners for Asia Pacific, Africa and the middle east respectively. May I also thank my departing senior private secretary, George Thomson? We do not thank our excellent civil servants nearly enough for the job that they do.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the Secretary of State adopt the trade policy of Her Majesty's Opposition?

Dr Fox: Inasmuch as I am able to discern what it is, which the events of this week make extremely difficult, the answer would have to be no—not least because, in regard to trade, the Opposition Front Bench has become a caricature of a loony left party in seeming to regard Justin Trudeau as a lackey of global corporatism.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Ministers have made much today about the vote on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement earlier this week. I am not quite sure what they do not understand about no deal with Canada being better than a bad deal; I thought that in other areas that was actually their party policy.

I want to focus on the damning report on carbon emissions released today by the Committee on Climate Change. The Conservative Committee Chair, Lord Deben, set out a stark demand: "Act now, climate change will not pause while we consider our options."

In response, will the Secretary of State explain why, on the latest figures, 99.4% of the support that UK Export Finance gives to the energy sector goes to fossil fuels? Will he tell the House what steps he is now taking to redress that imbalance, to promote and support renewable
energy and respect the Equator Principles, which his Department signed up to, about sustainability in global trade last year?

Dr Fox: When I saw the hon. Gentleman stand up, my heart sank, given that this is only a 30-minute session.

We use UK Export Finance to promote a whole range of environmental and trading issues—in fact, I was in discussions with Equinor in Oslo last week about how we can use UK Export Finance to further the use and export of renewables.

T2. [906147] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Following the excellent news this week that China has lifted its 20-year ban on UK beef exports, what action are Ministers taking to ensure that British farmers can make the most of this huge trading opportunity?

Dr Fox: Like the whole House, I am sure, I am delighted that the Chinese Government have decided to lift the ban. I would like to praise my own officials in helping to do that, although it would not have been possible if the Prime Minister had not raised the issue at the highest level during her visit to China.

I will be seeing how we can take advantage of the lifting of the ban when I visit China in August for the Joint Economic and Trade Committee. I hope that in future we will be able to take delegations of UK beef producers, so that we can seek to make the most of an incredibly large potential market.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The Government claim that they are aiming to promote British produce to the global market, post Brexit. On Sunday in Scotland, a strategy was launched to increase the value of fruit and vegetables to Scotland’s economy. The picking of that produce is heavily dependent on migrant labour from Europe; we simply cannot promote or export goods that are left rotting in the fields. What assurances can the Secretary of State offer this important sector that that essential labour force will be guaranteed?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise the importance of access to talent, both in agriculture and elsewhere. We aim to ensure that that continues after Brexit so that the enormous growth—of 70% in exports from Scotland since 2010—can continue, including that of the produce that he mentioned.

T3. [906148] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Grants for trade stands at overseas exhibitions offer vital support for businesses looking to trade internationally. Will the Minister update the House on what grants might be available for the 2019 exhibition season?

Dr Fox: The Department will provide an update on the grants available for trade show attendance in 2019-20 later this year in the context of our forthcoming export strategy. My hon. Friend has made an important point, but we must also ensure that the help we give is targeted to produce the best results, not the greatest number.

T5. [906151] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Secretary of State has previously suggested that outward direct investment is often seen as a fig leaf for outsourcing jobs and cutting costs at the expense of domestic investment in jobs. Does his Department monitor the number of jobs lost in the UK as a result of decisions to invest overseas? If so, will he tell us what they are?

Dr Fox: I do find it strange that people think that foreign direct investment in the United Kingdom is a good thing, but that UK investment in other countries is a bad thing. Such investment is an essential part of an open trading system. It is also an important part of our development agenda. Investing and creating jobs overseas, as we saw with Jaguar Land Rover in South Africa, for example, is often one of the ways in which we can provide help for some of the poorest countries in the world.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): One of our great exports is Scotch whisky, much of which is produced in my Moray constituency. What is the Department doing to ensure the geographical indication protection on Scotch whisky is maintained within the EU when we leave?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government are seeking to ensure the continued GI protection of Scotch whisky in the EU after Brexit. Negotiations on geographical indications are continuing, and we anticipate that all current UK GIs will continue to be protected by the EU’s geographical indications scheme after Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Matt Rodda. Where is the fella? Not here. Oh well, Mr Dakin is here.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What initial assessment have the Government made of the impact of steel tariffs on the UK industry? What support are the Government giving UK steel to mitigate the impact until the tariffs are removed?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I raised this with the EU Trade Commissioner last week. We are looking to see what impact there may be from any diversion and whether we need to introduce safeguards to protect UK steel producers. The earliest time that is likely to happen will be early to mid-July, and we are already seeing some movements that may justify it. As soon as we have the evidence to be able to justify such a decision, we will take it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I read a fantastic Ministry of Defence document the other day that showed how the global centre of economic activity has shifted over time: 30 years ago, it was in the middle of the Atlantic; today, it is somewhere over Egypt; but in 2050 it will be somewhere around Vietnam. Is it not right, therefore, that our trade negotiations should accordingly shift south and east?

Dr Fox: One of our reasons for introducing Her Majesty’s Trade Commissioners is to ensure that the United Kingdom has the proper organisation to take advantage of those shifts in global trade. As I have previously said in the House, the International Monetary Fund has said that, in the next 10 to 15 years, 90% of growth in the global economy will be outside continental Europe. That is where the opportunities will be, and that is where we need to be, too.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can the Trade Secretary tell us whether he intends to send the Trade Bill for Royal Assent, even if the Scottish Parliament withholds its consent from relevant clauses?

Dr Fox: We believe that, because the Trade Bill will give continuity to British businesses, including in Scotland, and because not passing it would be detrimental to the interests of businesses, jobs and workers in Scotland, the Scottish Government will, in the end, see sense and support the Bill.

Women and Equalities

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Women in the Science, Technology and Engineering Industries

1. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking with businesses to ensure that women are better represented in the science, technology and engineering industries. [906108]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): The Government are working with business to encourage more women to consider following a science, technology, engineering and maths career path. We are doing this through a range of interventions, from major communication campaigns like the Year of Engineering to specific in-school activities like STEM ambassadors.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister join me in commending the Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls in Romford? Retired engineers go into the school to tutor the young girls, particularly in the STEM industries. Does she agree that that is a great way to help young people, and particularly females, into this industry?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to that specific example and to my hon. Friend, who has championed such work in his constituency. Quite often we need to inform people not just about the career possibilities but about the pleasure those careers have given people. The STEM ambassadors programme, which is a network of 30,000 volunteers from a very wide range of backgrounds and employers, is vital to getting the message across.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Oldcastle Primary School in my constituency holds a STEM week in which it involves all our local businesses in a whole range of activities with its pupils. Last week Oldcastle and Trelaes Primary Schools—the right hon. Lady is the most appropriate Minister to appreciate this—attended the RAF presentation team and saw the whole range of STEM activities that are available in the armed forces. Does she agree that we also have an opportunity to highlight STEM by engaging our armed forces’ presentation teams?

Penny Mordaunt: I absolutely do, and I thank the hon. Lady for mentioning this during Armed Forces Week. There are fantastic career opportunities in not only the RAF but other services. Those armed forces are more operationally capable when we have equal numbers of men and women serving.

Period Poverty

2. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What progress the Government are making on ending period poverty. [906110]

7. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What progress the Government are making on ending period poverty. [906119]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): No girl or woman should be held back because of her gender or background. In March, this Government announced that Brook Young People would receive a grant of £1.5 million for its project in the UK “Let’s Talk. Period”. The project will support young women and girls by educating them on how to manage their menstruation and providing free sanitary products, if required.

Grahame Morris: Is it not outrageous that in 2018 period poverty exists at all? Is it not an indictment of this Government’s policies of austerity that schools such as South Hetton Primary School in my constituency are having to improvise and provide pant packs to ensure that students from low-income families never have to miss a school day for want of proper sanitary products?

Victoria Atkins: It was always a mystery to me why the Labour Government did not seize the opportunity to reduce the VAT rate on sanitary products to 5%, as the coalition Government did. The VAT charged on women’s sanitary products is the lowest possible amount that can be charged in order to comply with EU law. Some retailers have decided to pay the 5% VAT for their customers and have reduced prices accordingly. This is a matter for business, but the Government are committed to applying a zero rate of VAT on sanitary products by the earliest date possible when we leave the EU.

Danielle Rowley: I would like to—

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the hon. Lady to drop in on us; I am sure she has a very busy schedule. As I am burbling on at her, she will be able to recover her breath, and we very much look forward to hearing her.

Danielle Rowley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to announce to you and to the House—perhaps you will excuse my lateness—that today I am on my period, and this week it has already cost me £25. We know that the average cost of periods in the UK over a year is £500, which many women cannot afford. What is the Minister doing to address period poverty?

Victoria Atkins: As I say, we have invested £1.5 million in the Brook Young People “Let’s Talk. Period” project, supporting young women and girls on managing their menstruation and providing free products, if appropriate. The Government are committed to removing the VAT rate on sanitary products when we leave the EU. That will help with the cost of sanitary products.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What discussions has the Minister had with ministerial colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about bids to address period poverty through the tampon tax fund?
Victoria Atkins: The Government set up the tampon tax fund from the 5% VAT that is charged on sanitary products. The fund serves many charities, but it is particularly helping the Brook Young People project, which I welcome.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that we can reduce VAT to zero only because we are leaving the European Union? Can she quantify in millions of pounds how much that step will save women in Britain?

Victoria Atkins: On the first question, yes. On the second, I will write to my hon. Friend with the figure.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Wings Cymru, which supports every junior, primary and secondary school in my constituency, and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), in supplying sanitary products to all girls across the county borough? Will the Minister also welcome the fact that the Welsh Government have provided direct investment in order to give free sanitary products, after campaigning groups such as Wings Cymru have been lobbying? Is it not time that the UK Government stepped in to deliver more funding for free sanitary products?

Victoria Atkins: That is an interesting project and I am interested to hear about it. On the impact of periods on girls attending school, the Department for Education has conducted an analysis of absence statistics to see whether there is any evidence of period poverty having an impact on school attendance. There is currently no significant evidence, but we very much keep it under review, which is why there will be questions about it in the Department’s 2018 surveys for pupils and senior school leaders. We will of course review the project in Wales and, in fairness, the project in Scotland as well.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Welsh and Scottish Governments recognise that period poverty is a serious issue and have both introduced schemes to tackle it, so why are the UK Government failing to provide support to tackle this growing problem and leaving it to charities and individual groups such as Beauty Banks, a cosmetics equivalent of food banks organised by Jo Jones and Sali Hughes, to fill the gap?

Victoria Atkins: As I said, we are watching with interest the Scottish Government’s commitment to deliver access to free sanitary products in schools and other educational institutions, along with the Welsh commitment. We will look at and review the outcomes of those studies and projects.

Universal Credit: Women in Abusive Relationships

3. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Whether she has had discussions with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the operation of universal credit on women in abusive relationships.

Peter Grant: The Women’s Budget Group has confirmed what we all knew: the practice of insisting on paying universal credit into a single bank account per household makes it much easier for domestic abusers to exert financial control over their victims. What discussions has the Department had with the DWP to end the practice and make split payments the default, rather than an exceptional practice?

Kit Malthouse: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Universal credit continues to support victims of domestic violence through a range of measures, including special conditions for temporary accommodation, conditionality easements and same-day advances. Work coaches will also signpost domestic violence victims to expert third-party support.

Peter Grant: The Women’s Budget Group has confirmed what we all knew: the practice of insisting on paying universal credit into a single bank account per household makes it much easier for domestic abusers to exert financial control over their victims. What discussions has the Department had with the DWP to end the practice and make split payments the default, rather than an exceptional practice?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there have been several debates on split payments, not least the Westminster Hall debate last week. The Scottish Government have of course mandated—and I think legislated for—the introduction of split payments. We are going to work with them to make that happen and we will see how it goes. The new issue of mandatory split payments does, though, raise much more complexity than I think the hon. Gentleman might at first realise. There are questions about what the split should be if one person is not working and the other person is, or if one person pays more of the household bills than the other. There are lots of questions about whether people who are mandated to have split payments are able to opt out of them and, if so, whether they are doing so under duress. Much more important than split payments is our ability to detect and support the victims of domestic violence on the frontline.

Gavin Newlands: Notwithstanding the Minister’s answer, in addition to working with the Scottish Government, will he commit to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who called for the DWP to introduce split payments to protect women against financial domestic abuse and controlling relationships?

Kit Malthouse: Not at the moment, no. We have committed to enabling the introduction of split payments in Scotland, if it does indeed proceed. Work and discussions about split payments with the Scottish Government are ongoing, and I think the full truth of the complexity and the side effects of split payments is now dawning, so we shall see whether it proceeds. If it does, we will review it. As I said, I will keep an open mind about split payments and we will see what transpires in future.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The DWP has continued to say that split payments are available, but does the Minister agree that that may put women at risk of further abuse in relationships and may prevent them from asking for this option?

Kit Malthouse: I do not, no. We are making sure that work coaches at the frontline are able to offer and manually introduce a split payment when it is appropriate. The one thing that all of us who have been involved in work on domestic violence know is that it is critical that the victim is in control—that they have control of their...
own destiny and make decisions about what is in their best interests. If a split payment is appropriate, we will provide it.

**Maternity Discrimination**

4. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle maternity discrimination. [906112]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is unlawful to discriminate against women in the workplace because they are pregnant or new mothers. We are implementing the commitment set out in our response last year to the Women and Equalities Committee report on pregnancy discrimination. In our response to the Taylor review, we have committed to considering whether the legislation protecting pregnant women and new mothers from redundancy is adequate. That review is under way and we plan to publish a consultation in the summer.

Nigel Huddleston: Susan Wojcicki is the chief executive officer of YouTube and she has been quite outspoken on this issue. She says that mothers given paid maternity leave, for example, come back to work with new skills and insights that help a company’s bottom line. Does the Minister agree that supporting mothers in the workplace not only is the right thing to do, but can help and be good for business, too?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. We have the highest rate of female employment on record. We know that we have more women returning to work after they have had caring responsibilities. The message to business is very clear: women are good for business. Organisations with the highest level of gender diversity in their leadership teams are 15% more likely to outperform their industry rivals.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): How are women treated when they become pregnant and have to take maternity leave is a disgrace in both how it affects their job promotion and how it affects them when they come back after maternity leave. Can we have more leadership and a new charter so that every woman and every employer knows their rights?

Victoria Atkins: The law is very clear: employers are not allowed to discriminate against women on the basis of pregnancy or of their maternity commitments. As part of dealing with the gender pay gap, employers are beginning to talk about how they treat their workforce in a way that they did not a year or two ago. To me, this is part of readjusting what we expect from employers and what employees expect of the people for whom they work.

**Menopause Training and Information in the Workplace**

5. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of women who are caring responsibilities, their financial fragility and the symptoms of menopause while at work and so it is in employers’ interests to ensure that they have policies that adapt.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response. Can she further outline how information is provided to small businesses that do not have a human resources department and are not sure how to access help or information as easily as other businesses with HR departments?

Victoria Atkins: We are conscious of the difficulties of scale in small businesses, which is why the Women’s Business Council toolkit is available to employers of any size. We have also appointed the Business in the Community age at work leadership team as the business champion for older workers. We very much hope that its work will help employers and women understand their rights.

**FTSE 100 Finance Chief Roles**

6. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of women in FTSE 100 finance chief roles. [906116]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): We are supporting the Hampton-Alexander review targets for women to hold 33% of all senior leadership and board positions in the FTSE 100 by 2020. Some 29% of the FTSE 100 board positions are now held by women, which is up from 12.5% in 2011.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I am sure that she would agree with me that, lower down the scale, a lot more needs to be done in terms of pay equality for women. Will she also have a discussion with her colleague at the DWP regarding the 11,000 WASPI women in Coventry who were born after 1951 and who are living in poverty to a certain extent because they cannot get their pension?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I am keen to look at a broader range of women than the Government Equalities Office has perhaps previously focused on, including the category of older women. We are really trying to look at everything facing women at that point in their life, including their caring responsibilities, their financial fragility and the options they have to stay economically active.
9. Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure the effectiveness of legislation on the distribution of intimate sexual images without permission.

Edward Argar: It is a pleasure that the first question that I will answer from this Dispatch Box is from my right hon. Friend, who has done so much to highlight and drive progress on these issues as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. The parliamentary under-secretary of state for justice: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s kind words. I look forward to exchanging pleasant words with her across the Dispatch Box on many future occasions. She is right to highlight the importance of the issue. As I have said, we are committed to supporting and protecting victims. The opportunity currently exists for any victim—and, similarly, for witnesses—to apply for reporting restrictions to help them give evidence. Although we are not at this stage committing to review the rules around anonymity, we do of course continue to look at this matter. All factors will be considered as we move forward with this important legislation.

Oral Answers

T1. 906123 Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight these issues. A range of factors can cause victims not to support charges; these include the legal and court process, the length of time the process takes and aspects such as anonymity, which my right hon. Friend mentioned. Although charging is a matter for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, and we have no immediate plans to review the rules around anonymity, we are committed to supporting all victims of crime and to improving processes where possible. We remain committed to bringing forward a victims strategy this summer, in which we will look at this factor and broader issues.

Topical Questions

T2. 906124 Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does the Minister agree that making upskirting a specific criminal offence, punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment, and closing this legal loophole will better protect victims and increase convictions?

Edward Argar: I am grateful for the shadow Minister’s kind words. I look forward to exchanging pleasant words with her across the Dispatch Box on many future occasions. She is right to highlight the importance of the issue. As I have said, we are committed to supporting and protecting victims. The opportunity currently exists for any victim—and, similarly, for witnesses—to apply for reporting restrictions to help them give evidence. Although we are not at this stage committing to review the rules around anonymity, we do of course continue to look at this matter. All factors will be considered as we move forward with this important legislation.
We are doing exactly what she alludes to—closing a loophole—and ensuring that the most serious sexual offenders go on the sex offenders register. We are determined to continue to work across the House and with Gina Martin and other campaigners to get this important law on the statute book.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Talking about working across the House, the Women and Equalities Committee’s recent report on the race disparity audit notes: “The ability to disaggregate is essential for understanding the roles that geography, age, gender, social class and poverty play in creating poorer outcomes for some people than for others.” The socioeconomic duty would ensure that authorities gather that data and adopt policies to tackle inequalities. Will the Government enact section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 to address the conclusions and recommendations of the race disparity audit and the Women and Equalities Committee?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is absolutely right; we cannot address inequalities in silos. Much of the work that I have been doing in this new role has been looking at how we get all areas dealing with inequalities across Government to become more than the sum of their parts. I am looking at the specific issue that she raises. We are also in discussion with political parties with regard to their obligations on reporting data and raising good practice across all sectors.

Edward Argar: We are applying a very similar approach to this to voyeurism, which carries a substantial two-year maximum custodial sentence, in order to reflect fully the seriousness of the crime. In addition, we are ensuring that the most serious sexual offenders can be placed on the sex offenders register, to help safeguard society, using the same bar as in our current law on voyeurism. The Bill is focused and clear, and I very much look forward to it continuing to receive cross-party support so that it can progress rapidly.

Penny Mordaunt: We will certainly do that. We will publish the action plan, the survey results—the results of the largest survey of its kind ever undertaken in the world—and the Gender Recognition Act 2004 consultation. The survey results are important and they give us a good base to work from, but they are also sad reading and absolute evidence that we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that the LGBT+ community can thrive in the UK.

Edward Argar: I am grateful for the question from the right hon. Lady, who I know has long taken a close interest in these matters. The revenge porn helpline does great work, and within the context of the broader debate we are having at the moment, we will continue to look at it very carefully.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): On Tuesday, I attended the launch of the Coventry women’s partnership, which is a brilliant three-year, city-wide programme aiming to improve economic outcomes for women by providing access to skills, training, confidence building and support into employment. Does the Minister agree that this type of holistic programme of support is necessary if we are to empower women and achieve a more gender-equal future?

Edward Argar: Absolutely. It sounds like a wonderful initiative and event. I certainly hope that our locally based work coaches were involved in that event so that they could give the extensive assistance that we are now able to provide to all those seeking work.

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree. It sounds like a wonderful initiative and event. I certainly hope that our locally based work coaches were involved in that event so that they could give the extensive assistance that we are now able to provide to all those seeking work.

Edward Argar: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend for her question, because it gives me the opportunity to continue to work across the House and with Gina Martin and other campaigners to get this important law on the statute book.

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Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Just this morning, the Government have published their report on the first year of the two-child restriction policy and rape clause in relation to child tax credits. As we predicted, the impact on women has been devastating: 3,000 families have been denied support and 190 women have had to declare the fact that they are survivors of rape in order to obtain support. How can this Government continue to defend this abhorrent and disgusting policy, and will they finally review it?

Kit Malthouse: As I have said in the past, we keep all our policies under constant review. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that one of the fundamental tenets of welfare reform is that the world of welfare should reflect the world of work and that people on welfare should have to take the same decisions as those who are in work, and that includes making decisions about the number of children they may or may not have. It is worth explaining that there are no current losers from the policy, but only people in contemplation.

On the particular issue of those who have children and what the hon. Gentleman calls the rape clause, we are trying to be as sensitive as we possibly can. I have made the offer to his SNP colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), to meet her if she has ideas about a better way to handle it. At the moment, no one needs to make a specific declaration; we can signpost people to, and assist them in getting, the support they need in those circumstances. We are obviously very keen to hear from third-party organisations working with women subject to that appalling situation to make sure they get the support they need.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Just a few days ago, the Government helped to lead the way by supporting proposals from the International Labour Organisation to agree a convention outlawing sexual harassment at work around the world. Will my hon. Friend urge colleagues to include support for this convention in their trade talks, which I know are top of the Government’s agenda?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): As my right hon. Friend knows, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities and I take a great interest in this subject, and we will be encouraging all Departments to have that principle in mind, not just in international trade agreements, but in every policy that can be so affected.
Nuclear Sector Deal

10.40 am

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the nuclear sector deal.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Business Secretary is currently in north Wales, in Trawsfynydd, launching the nuclear sector deal, which is why I am here in his place.

The industrial strategy sets out how long-term partnerships between the Government and industry can create significant opportunities to boost productivity, employment, innovation and skills. We committed to agreeing sector deals with industries that put forward ambitious proposals to boost productivity and earning power in their sector. The Government are today launching the nuclear sector deal, the fifth in a series of deals, as part of their industrial strategy. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the long-standing support and work of the hon. Gentleman’s predecessor, Lord Hutton of Furness, who has helped to facilitate the deal today from the industry side.

The nuclear sector in the UK is an economic powerhouse, equivalent in scale to the aerospace industry. It provides highly skilled, long-term employment for 87,500 people and is a driver of regional growth. Nuclear generation provides more than 20% of the UK’s electricity supply, and its low-carbon, reliable baseload power complements the growing renewable portfolio that is enabling the UK to reduce CO\(_2\) emissions in line with our commitments. The nuclear sector deal announces a package of measures to support the sector as we develop low-carbon nuclear power and continue to clean up our nuclear legacy.

The deal is about the Government and industry working in partnership to drive competitiveness across the nuclear sector. We will use these initial actions as a platform for future collaboration and investment in the sector. The Government have notified Parliament of today’s deal by means of a written ministerial statement and deposited a copy of the sector deal in the Libraries of both Houses. This is a good day for the nuclear industry and for Wales, where we are focusing on small modular reactors that can help Wales become a world leader in this sector.

John Woodcock: I thank the Minister for reading studiously from the brief presented to him, but why on earth did the Business Secretary, or indeed the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, not see fit either to come to Parliament or to make themselves available to answer questions on this important issue, but instead issue a press release last night and allow us as Members of Parliament to read about it?

The deal is indeed welcome, and I join the Minister in praising my predecessor, Lord Hutton, for the work that he did when in this Chamber and which he now does in his role in the civil nuclear industry in pushing the Government along on this. Can the Minister say more about small modular reactors? How many do the Government expect there to be within the next 10 years? How will the Government ensure that British firms and British research and development, and not simply foreign direct investment, benefit? Can he guarantee that this will supplement the larger civil nuclear build, rather than replace it? Planning for the long term, as this strategy seeks to do, is important and right, but as I hope he knows, the industry faces potential crisis now. What is happening on Euratom? Can he guarantee that standards will be maintained absolutely and that there will be sufficient people to deliver them as we approach the cliff edge?

What is the Government’s position on direct investment? Will the Government now pledge to invest directly in Moorside, as they are planning to do in Wylfa? More than 20,000 jobs are at stake in south Cumbria unless the Government act on that.

Talk of supporting nuclear clusters is all very well, but will the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy intervene directly with the Department for Transport in Cumbria and stop the wonderful, world-class nuclear cluster that we could have there being inhibited by the fact that we have to drive through a farmyard to get from civil nuclear in the west to the nuclear submarine building programme in the south, in my constituency?

Mr Gyimah: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but a written ministerial statement is being laid before Parliament today, and I reiterate that the Secretary of State and the Energy Minister are in Wales, launching the nuclear sector deal as we speak. Given the hon. Gentleman’s long-standing, diligent campaign in this area, I am happy to offer him a meeting with the Secretary of State and officials as soon as possible, to go through all the elements of the deal and especially its impact on his constituency.

The hon. Gentleman asked how many small modular reactors there would be. The honest answer is that the number is not set at the moment. I hope he will work with the sector and regulators to ensure that standards will be maintained absolutely and that there will be sufficient people to deliver them as we approach the cliff edge.

Safety and security is obviously a top priority and we will work with the sector and regulators to ensure that our staff are in place, but I reiterate the offer of a meeting as soon as possible, at which the hon. Gentleman may discuss all the details with officials and Ministers.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): This is a brilliant day and I am delighted that the Government are demonstrating their recognition of our nuclear sector. I was particularly pleased to see the reference to 40% more females working in the industry by 2030, and I hope the Minister will join me in acknowledging the work that the women in nuclear do, but also the barriers, because often, nuclear licensed sites are in coastal, rural locations where affordable, flexible, high-quality childcare is simply not available at the moment. I hope he will work with me in improving that in my constituency. The Minister talks of the 87,500 workers in the nuclear industry. In Cumbria, we have 27,000 of those; we are absolutely the centre of nuclear excellence.
Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend, who has campaigned assiduously on this issue since she joined the House, makes a very good point around the commitment to increase the number of women working in the sector. That is a significant commitment, and one that we are determined to deliver on.

More generally, for Cumbria, a major component of the deal is support for lower-cost decommissioning using advanced manufacturing techniques, so Cumbria is set to benefit, as it is from Sellafield which, as my hon. Friend said, employs several thousand people and leads on some of the most complex decommissioning challenges.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I welcome the publication, albeit delayed, of a nuclear sector deal, but the Secretary of State really should be here to announce the deal, not least so that we can get some answers to the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), which we did not in the Minister’s previous response. Nuclear energy plays an important part in reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and in delivering jobs and prosperity to the parts of the country that most need investment, not least my hon. Friend’s constituency. We very much welcome the 40% target of women working in the civil nuclear sector by 2030, but when is it going to be 50%?

This announcement is mostly a repackaging of existing policy. Of the headline £200 million, it seems that only £10 million is new Government funding, so will the Minister confirm the £56 million for R&D for advanced modular reactors and the £86 million for a national fusion technology platform, both announced last December, and the £32 million for an advanced manufacturing and construction programme, which was unveiled last month? Will he also confirm why there has been a considerable downgrade in the funding available for small modular reactors? In 2015, the then Chancellor said that £250 million would be allocated to small nuclear reactors. At the end of 2017, the Department said that £100 million would be allocated, and now it is just £56 million.

The Minister mentioned Wales, so will he take the opportunity to clarify the Government’s funding arrangements for the Wylfa plant in Anglesey? In the week when the Government have scrapped the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, it has become clear that different rules apply for different technologies. This announcement should have been made alongside a commitment to invest in tidal energy. Both are equally important. The Committee on Climate Change says today that the Government are failing to keep up with agreed targets on decarbonisation. With this week’s announcement to scrap the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, the expansion of airport capacity and the modesty of the nuclear sector deal, will he tell us how the Government are going to meet their climate change obligations?

Mr Gyimah: On the question of there being no new money here, that is not correct. The deal announced today has £20 million for advanced manufacturing, £10 million for supply chain support, £40 million for potential hydraulics facilities in north Wales and £32 million of industry money, and potentially more to come. That is new money. On the much broader question of tidal energy versus nuclear, to reiterate the arguments that have been made in the House already this week, the Swansea bay proposal would cost £1.3 billion to build but would have produced only 0.15% of the electricity we use each year—a capital cost that is more than three times as much per unit of electricity as Hinkley Point C. The same power generated by Swansea Bay over 60 years would cost only £400 million for offshore wind, even at today’s prices. There are some people you can never please, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) said, today is a good story for the nuclear industry, and I hope that Opposition Members join us in welcoming it.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome today’s sector deal and particularly the role for small modular reactors, which are an obvious replacement for decommissioned coal-fired power stations. Will the Minister confirm that today’s announcement means that nuclear remains a key part of our energy mix, providing a diverse energy source as part of this Government’s industrial strategy?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is right: nuclear is a key part of the energy mix and we are looking for low-cost, reliable and stable sources of energy. That is why our industrial strategy is focusing today on a nuclear energy deal to deliver precisely that.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): With Mark Carney saying that Brexit has cost each household £900, this Government’s support for costly nuclear energy is a further blow to household budgets. The deal coincides with the proposed nuclear power station at Wylfa in Anglesey in north Wales with a traelled strike price of around £80 per megawatt-hour, brought down from Hinkley’s £92.5 per megawatt-hour through UK Government support with capital costs. This is still significantly more than wind, which comes in at around £57.5 per megawatt-hour, even including intermittancy costs. Having failed the North sea in its time of need and abandoned cost-effective carbon capture and renewables technology, why do the UK Government persist with an energy policy that continues to fail Scottish industry while hiking cost for consumers?

Mr Gyimah: We have become accustomed in this House to Scottish National party MPs doing one thing north of the border and saying a different thing south of the border. The former Member for Gordon, when he was First Minister, backed the life extension of the nuclear plants in Scotland, so I am surprised that faced with this deal they are not welcoming the jobs in the supply chain from which Scotland will benefit. Yes, we are focused on nuclear, but as part of a balanced approach to ensure that we have the energy sources we need for the future.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): This announcement is very welcome indeed, particularly in relation to the under-representation of women in the nuclear industry. Has there been any scoping as to the positive impact on emissions of this new investment?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is right to point out the commitment to women. Currently, the percentage of women in the sector is 22%. We believe that is far too low. Forty per cent. is an ambition we intend to meet and build on, although that does not seem to be enough for the Opposition. The impact on emissions has been considered. I draw the attention of Members to the nuclear deal, which is in the House of Commons Library.
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I welcome the launch of the nuclear sector deal, which is being held this morning in Trawsfynydd power station in my constituency. I congratulate local people and trade unions, and especially Prospect rep Rory Trappe of Blaenau Ffestiniog, for working to safeguard the tradition of innovative and safe energy production in the heart of Welsh-speaking Meirionnydd. The people of Wales seek to be equipped with the means to overcome poverty. Today’s announcement is a step in the right direction that will strengthen our capacity to generate and to profit from exporting energy, offering once again the prospect of well-paid technology jobs in a region that presently suffers some of the lowest wages in the UK. I call on the Minister to do all he can to work with the Welsh Government, Cyngor Gwynedd, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and higher education to develop Trawsfynydd to its full economic potential, and I specifically call for final site clearance of the two decommissioned reactors to enable that.

Mr Speaker: I will assume the insertion of a question mark.

Mr Gyimah: I welcome the extended question from the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right to say that small modular reactors in Wales could position Wales as a world leader. It is encouraging to see Ministers from Westminster at the launch today. They are working closely in partnership with Welsh Government officials. I believe that that is how we are going to make this a success. On the broader question, we will do everything possible to make this work for Wales.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I too welcome today’s announcement. Will the Minister do whatever he can to back the new industrial research and development advanced manufacturing research centre site planned for Derby’s Infinity Park, located alongside the global headquarters for Rolls-Royce, which already leads the way in small modular reactors?

Mr Gyimah: Part of the way to achieve success in this area, and indeed in most other areas of science, is to have clusters around the country. Part of the industrial strategy is to ensure that where such clusters exist, support is available for them to be successful, as with the one in Derby that my hon. Friend mentions.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on once again assiduously doing his job as a constituency Member. He asked a question of the Minister which was not answered: what is going to happen with regard to Euratom, particularly if we crash out with no deal? Can the Minister assure us that we will continue to be in Euratom through the transition period and after any agreement?

Mr Gyimah: The Prime Minister has made it clear that, as part of our negotiations with the EU, we want to associate with Euratom research and training, as well as the new science and research programme, Horizon Europe. We are working on that and look to be a full partner with the EU, paying our share of the costs. Obviously, as part of the implementation period we will continue to be a part of it. The rest is subject to negotiations, but we have made it very clear to the European Union that we want to continue to associate.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What will the impact be of the measures associated with this deal on the cost of new nuclear power stations and on decommissioning former nuclear sites?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good question. The deal should reduce the cost of decommissioning—while, obviously, maintaining the highest safety standards—but it will also bring us up to date with modern methods.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The costs of all renewable technologies, including wind and solar, have fallen faster than almost anyone predicted, and they now represent much better-value low-carbon energy. However, the Government cut investment in renewables by more than 50% in 2017, and just this week they rejected proposals for the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. Is this additional investment in nuclear further evidence that the Government are turning their back on renewables?

Mr Gyimah: On the contrary. Since 1990, the UK has cut emissions by 43%, while our economy has grown by more than two thirds. We have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation, while leading the G7 countries in growth in national income per person. We are actually increasing our economic growth, while at the same time ensuring that we are doing what we need to do for the environment by promoting clean growth.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given the good news that the Minister has announced, I am surprised that it took an urgent question from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) to secure a Government response.

Will my hon. Friend update us on what will be done to enable small modular reactors to be spread across the United Kingdom, so that we can cease to rely on fossil fuels?

Mr Gyimah: The Government do not intend to hide their light under a bushel in terms of the good news. My hon. Friend can find the paper on the sector deal in the House of Commons Library. As for the promotion of small modular reactors across the UK, it is part of our industrial strategy, but the nuclear sector deal and our work with the industry will help in a specific way.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister said that the Government’s priority was to build the infrastructure that the country needs, but, with barely a mention of climate change, his announcement must seem like hollow words to the people of south Wales and the west of England, coming as it does in the same week as the decision not to support the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. When will the Government recognise the huge untapped potential of tidal energy, and get serious about climate change?

Mr Gyimah: I have already made it very clear that the Government have succeeded in cutting our emissions while increasing growth. The nuclear sector deal is part of our ambition for cleaner growth in this country. I know that Opposition Members do not agree with the decision on the tidal lagoon, but it is clear that the same power generation over 60 years with offshore wind would cost only £400 million, even at today’s prices. Sometimes it is necessary to look at the hard facts and make decisions based on those.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the role that the nuclear industry plays in providing highly paid and highly skilled jobs throughout the south-west, including south Devon, this announcement is very welcome, but how does the Minister envisage the benefits of the sector deal being spread across the United Kingdom, and particularly into the south-west of England?

Mr Gyimah: I expect the benefits to be spread across the country. There will be up to £2 billion-worth of domestic and international contract wins, which will help the supply chain of the nuclear industry throughout the country.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on securing the urgent question.

Renewables are also an important part of our energy mix, and in east Yorkshire, particularly with offshore wind, we are leading the world in that development. When might we see a sector deal for renewables, and can the Minister tell us when we will be given more details about the sector deals for local areas which the Government announced, I think, last year?

Mr Gyimah: As part of our industrial strategy, we committed ourselves to a series of sector deals. So far, five have been announced, including the life sciences deal, the automotive sector deal, the artificial intelligence deal, and the nuclear sector deal announced today. We are looking for opportunities across the board, and if there is an opportunity for us to develop a sector deal working with industry, we are willing to proceed. As the hon. Lady knows, clean growth is one of the four grand challenges in the industrial strategy, and we will make sure that we do everything we need to do to make a success of it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Minister has confirmed that the new nuclear sector deal plans to reduce the costs both of new-build nuclear projects and of decommissioning old nuclear sites. By how much and by when?

Mr Gyimah: We can always on my hon. Friend for a very precise question. We expect, by 2030, a 30% reduction in the cost of new-build projects. We also want, by 2030, to improve diversity across the sector by achieving 40% female participation, as I mentioned. Again by 2030, we expect to achieve savings of 20% in the cost of decommissioning.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that I spent seven happy years as a councillor in Lliw Valley near Swansea in south Wales? I am therefore very disappointed that this morning’s announcement, which I welcome, could not have been combined with the right decision this week on the Swansea Bay barrage scheme. While I am in favour of small nuclear energy initiatives and hope they will spread, is there not still a question mark over what we do with nuclear waste? We still have not resolved that, and it is still a real problem and a real challenge for our society. Will he give an assurance that we will have an answer?

Mr Gyimah: I had not been aware of the hon. Gentleman’s distinguished career in local government, but I am now.

Mr Speaker: I had not been aware of the hon. Gentleman’s distinguished career, Mr Speaker—you learn something new every day in this House.

Mr Gyimah: Nor had I been aware of the hon. Gentleman’s distinguished career, Mr Speaker—as I said, we are not against tidal lagoons, but they must demonstrate value for money for consumers and public funds.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The electronic infrastructure summit held this week in London urged the need for independent cyber-security audits across critical national infrastructure, particularly in the energy sector. Does the Minister agree that nuclear is one sector where we urgently need to ensure that cyber-security keeps us free from attacks and black sky events?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady identifies a risk to this critical infrastructure. I can assure her that we take all the steps necessary to make sure that it is protected, and cyber-security is one of those.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In Scotland, the nuclear energy sector is worth £1 billion a year, employs 12,000 people, and generates 35% of the nation’s electricity in a stable and consistent way. Scotland’s four advanced gas-cooled reactors are due to be decommissioned and taken offline by 2030. Has the Minister had any discussions with his Scottish ministerial counterparts on the huge industrial opportunity that this presents for Scotland at Hunterston and Torness after 2030?

Mr Gyimah: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has recognised that there is a huge opportunity for Scotland in this deal, given how much Scotland participates in the supply chain. As we are doing with the devolved Government in Wales, we will be working with all the devolved Administrations, where this is relevant to them, to make a success of this deal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that an essential component of this deal is the research and development component to make the use of nuclear power safer and more effective, and to better harness the ability of the UK to produce our own energy as opposed to relying on middle eastern fuel?
Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the R and D component as critical to success in this field. In the industrial strategy we have committed to increase the R and D spend from the current 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. This will be a mixture of public and private investment, and by achieving this huge commitment—£80 billion over the next decade—we will be able to do the sorts of things we need to do here in nuclear to make sure we have a secure source of energy.

Business of the House

11.9 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include:

Monday 2 July—Estimates day (3rd allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Tuesday 3 July—Estimates day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Education and Her Majesty’s Treasury that relate to grants to the devolved institutions.

At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of trustees to the House Of Commons Members Fund.

Wednesday 4 July—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Ivory Bill, followed by Opposition day (allotted half day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced.

Thursday 5 July—General debate on the principle of proxy voting, followed by a debate on a motion on the future of the transforming care programme. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 6 July—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 9 July will include:

Monday 9 July—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget (No.2) Bill.

Alongside the news that the EU withdrawal Bill received Royal Assent, there are a couple of other things to celebrate in Parliament this week. First, the House of Commons Library reaches the ripe old age of 200; that is 200 years the House has benefited from this crucial service and for that we are very grateful. Secondly, the Voice & Vote exhibition has launched in Westminster Hall and is open right through to October. Visitors can see just how far women in politics have come since they were hidden behind the brass grilles above this very Chamber. In this Vote 100 year, it is bound to be a hugely popular event. I hope many will come to Westminster to relive those achievements. Finally, it is National Democracy Week next week. There is a huge programme of events taking place right across Whitehall and I look forward to being a part of it.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I echo very much what the Leader of the House has just said about the magnificent and celebratory exhibition in Westminster Hall, and in echoing that I urge people attending our proceedings today if they have a little spare time and have not already viewed the exhibition to do so. An enormous amount of specialist loving care and preparation have gone into it and, like the Leader of the House, I am very proud of the exhibition. I joined the Lords Speaker and
the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee on Tuesday evening formally to open it, and it is well worth seeing.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business; we are back to a week and a day.

When the Leader of the House tables a change in Standing Orders, will she give the Opposition sight of the motion? We did not have that when there was a change from three to five days in the estimates motion. There was no prior discussion through the Whips Office or the usual channels. Can she let us know the reasons behind the change?

May I also pick up on what the Leader of the House said about me a couple of weeks ago? She said I was not “fulfilling the democratic will of the people of Walsall.”—[Official Report, 14 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 1102.]

My constituency may have voted to leave, but one ward voted to remain and my job—and the job of all Members—is to balance the 48% and the 52%. Our duty is to act in the best interests of all our constituents and the whole of the UK. We have to hear the evidence on the impact. Perhaps she will rephrase that and wait for the Electoral Commission report on the leave campaign during the referendum. I am sure she will find time to debate that report in Government time and, in the meantime, join me in congratulating the excellent journalist Carole Cadwalladr in winning the George Orwell prize for her investigative work with the whistleblower Christopher Wylie, which resulted in an apology from Facebook and the collapse of Cambridge Analytica because they misused personal data.

Saturday is the International Day of Parliamentarism—I think that is how it is pronounced—a new day that was agreed by the United Nations, which adopted a resolution on the interaction between the UN, national Parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Of course, this Government voted down the fact that Parliament is sovereign last week. They do not want to give Parliament a final say. The Leader of the House will know that that had nothing to do with the negotiations; all that Parliament wanted was to be sovereign and to have a final say on the terms of the deal.

We need that final say because the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union first told us that there were no sectoral analyses, then, after pressure from the Opposition, he published them. He then said that there was no preliminary analysis on our exiting EU; then he published it. Now he says that there is a White Paper, but it is apparently written in invisible ink. We need to know when it will be published. Will the Leader of the House tell us when that will happen? Will she also tell us whether the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will return before the recess? They seem to be stuck in a legislatively logjam, and we do not appear to have anything to do after 9 July. Will she table the next stages of those Bills?

How do we mark Armed Forces Day on Saturday? The Opposition Labour party has called for proper investment in our armed forces so that the UK can retain its rightful place as a tier 1 military nation, and I am pleased to see that the Defence Secretary has now joined us in making that call. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the Government will make time for a statement on restoring our armed forces to a tier 1 military nation?

It was Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Day yesterday. We have heard what the Foreign Secretary thinks of business, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care joined in last Sunday. The Tory leader in Wales has had to resign over his anti-business comments. Business leaders have rightly raised their concerns, in a measured way, about what they are going to do to plan for their workforce and for their companies. And, as if to underline the Government’s anti-business credentials, they have now turned off the switch on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. This seems to be an anti-business, anti-innovative Government.

The Leader of the House has announced an estimates day on the NHS. When can we have a debate on Torbay—another council that is about to collapse? It was a pioneer in integrated care. As a member of the Health Committee, I visited Torbay, where I saw an integrated service that tracked “Mrs Smith” from the start of the process in social care, through the NHS and back out again. They told us that, when the Health and Social Care Bill became an Act, they would not be able to pool the budgets. When we went to Denmark, they wanted to look at our system. They looked at Torbay and reminded us about “Mrs Smith”.

The Government seem to be too busy fighting among themselves to fight for this country. We have the Defence Secretary at loggerheads with the Chancellor, who has had to concede to the Health Secretary, promising money that the Chancellor said he did not have. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has said that the Environment Secretary is talking nonsense, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has apparently pulled a white rabbit out of a hat, rather than a White Paper. The Leader of the House has also joined in, saying that the Environment Secretary and the Trade Secretary are tearing to shreds the Prime Minister’s preferred option for the customs partnership. There’s loyalty for you.

I want to join the Leader of the House in talking about some positive aspects. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) is having a discussion on the political life of Nye Bevan. He will be speaking on the NHS in the Macmillan Room on Wednesday and, with your kind permission, Mr Speaker, hosting a reception in Speaker’s House. I also want to celebrate 200 years of the Library, which is absolutely fantastic. Again thanks to you, Mr Speaker, there will be a reception in Speaker’s House. I want to join you and the Leader of the House in thanking Melanie Unwin and Mari Takayanagi, who have taken four years to curate the Voice & Vote exhibition in Westminster Hall. I, too, encourage all Members and their constituents to visit that fantastic exhibition.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has asked about estimates day debates. I am sure she is aware that estimates are laid annually rather than sessionally. This means that the Government must request supply from the House twice a year. The motion tabled by the Government and agreed by the House on Tuesday made provision for next week’s debates to take place in line with the recommendations of the Liaison Committee and the Procedure Committee, and in accordance with
Monday’s resolution of the House about the subject of the debates. She claimed not to know any of that, but I am sure that, if she were to ask, she would find that those are the clear conventions of the House.

The hon. Lady asked about the legislative programme and claimed that no progress is being made. I say to her again, as I often do, that 36 important Bills have been introduced so far this Session; that is absolutely in line with other parliamentary Sessions. Nineteen Bills have been sent for Royal Assent already, hundreds of statutory instruments have been passed by each House, and seven draft Bills have been published.

The hon. Lady likes to imply that important business is not going on, yet just yesterday we had the Second Reading of the Offensive Weapons Bill, which seeks to make it harder for young people to buy knives and acid online and seeks to ban possession of such awful things as zombie knives, knuckle dusters and “death stars”. Those are incredibly important domestic pieces of legislation that really matter to the country, if not the Opposition. Our energy price caps Bill is on track; the Tenants Fees Bill will make renting easier and fairer; the Ivory Bill will introduce the toughest ban in the world; and our Data Protection Act is already making sure that the UK maintains our gold standard in data protection. It is extraordinary that the hon. Lady does not seem to be aware of this important legislation.

The hon. Lady says that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is an affront to Parliament; I do not think that of a Bill on which more than 280 hours of debate took place, to which there were more than 1,400 amendments and to which both Houses have contributed significant changes, or of a Bill that will give certainty for citizens and businesses in this country as we leave the EU in March 2019. That is what the people of this country, including in Walsall—the hon. Lady’s part of the country—voted for: a democratic vote of the majority of the people. All Members across the House should welcome that.

It is a great shame that Opposition Members are all over the place—some in the Aye Lobby, some in the No Lobby, some sitting on their hands and some just disappearing from this place altogether. I found it extraordinary that the Opposition chose to vote against programme motions earlier this week, but then disappeared; having lost the programme motion, they had nothing further to say on the subject. It is absolutely astonishing—not on the part of the Government, but on the part of the Opposition. They do not know what they are doing.

The hon. Lady talked about the armed forces, and I absolutely pay tribute to their amazing work at this important time. But again, I gently point out that it is the Government side of the House that has enshrined the armed forces covenant in law; has provided nearly £500 million from LIBOR bank fines to support armed forces charities and other good causes; has provided £200 million for the Forces Help to Buy; has allowed £65 million on upgrading service family accommodation; and is providing far more support for veterans than ever before. The armed forces do a fantastic job and we will continue to support them. We will continue to have a £37 billion defence budget and to be the second biggest defence spender in NATO. That is incredibly important for the security and safety of people in this country.

The hon. Lady asks about business and Brexit. She likes to suggest, as Opposition Members have, that not much consultation is going on. I can tell her that Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers alone have undertaken more than 500 recorded engagements with businesses since July 2016. The Secretaries of State for DExEU and for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, along with the Chancellor, have an EU exit business advisory group, involving the directors general of the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the EEF, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. We have hosted many CEOs from a range of businesses across the economy at events at Chevening House.

It is this Government who are listening to the needs of businesses; that is why we have negotiated for an implementation period, which was welcomed by those businesses. That is absolutely vital. It is a great shame that Opposition Members cannot seem to decide what they support. They are certainly not supporting a successful Brexit for the United Kingdom in March 2019. Fortunately, it is this Government and our Prime Minister who are determined to achieve a Brexit that will work for all parts of the United Kingdom.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on noise pollution? You and your deputies, Mr Speaker, do an admirable job in dealing with noise in this Chamber, but the same cannot be said about Southend West at the moment. I am receiving increasing complaints from local residents about noise from various venues, not to mention the thorny problem of aircraft noise.

**Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend raises an interesting point, and one that is of great importance not only to his constituents but to many across the country. The Government are committed to making sure that noise is managed effectively in order to promote good health and quality of life. To avoid significant noise impacts, we have strong protections in place in our planning system, in our environmental permitting systems, in our vehicle and product standards regulations and, of course, in our noise abatement legislation. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be engaging closely with stakeholders in the months ahead on what more we can do to effectively manage noise in ways that best address the country’s needs.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I fully endorse what she said and what you said, Mr Speaker, about the Voice & Vote exhibition in Westminster Hall.

As Gareth Southgate’s finest get ready to face the might of Belgium, the Prime Minister, almost ironically, is off to Brussels today. I wonder who will fare better in the battles with Barnier’s barmy bureaucrat army. Where Gareth Southgate has Harry Kane as his mercurial, talismanic front man, the Prime Minister has, well, the Foreign Secretary and his woeful disciplinary record offered up for transfer. Where Southgate’s side is a well-organised, disciplined unit, the Prime Minister’s could not be more shambolic and undisciplined—they are more likely to score a series of own goals. As all the St George’s flags go up today, we can all join in: we only sing when we’re leaving.
May we please have a debate on all this dark money that is running rampant through some political parties in this House? Earlier this week, an investigation by BBC Northern Ireland shone a shocking light on the practices of former Scottish Conservative vice-chair Richard Cook and some of the leave campaign’s funding. The investigation raises further questions about donations to the Scottish Conservatives.

The shady Scottish Unionist Association Trust has given or loaned some £319,000 to Conservative candidates in Scotland. This trust has no official address and no history of transparency but has made donations to at least two Scottish Conservative Members. I have asked the Electoral Commission to fully investigate the Scottish Unionist Association Trust—this murky organisation has been bankrolling the Tories in Scotland for the past few years—but we need a full debate on this dark money, as I fear we have seen only the tip of the Scottish Tory dodgy donations iceberg.

Lastly, the Scottish schools have broken up for the summer holidays. Whereas Members representing English constituencies will again benefit from being able to spend the full summer holidays with their school-age children, we from Scotland will not. On behalf of all Scottish Members here today, I thank the Leader of the House once again.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman did not say who he will be supporting today. Is it Belgium or is it England? Is it the Prime Minister or is it Michel Barnier? It would be interesting to know the answers, but I appreciate that it is for me to answer the questions, and I absolutely assure him that I will be supporting England all the way. I would go a step further and say that I will always support the entire United Kingdom.

Valerie Vaz: What about the Prime Minister?

Andrea Leadsom: I fully support the Prime Minister, and I think she is doing a superb job of representing the interests of the entire United Kingdom as we seek a good Brexit.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked about the Electoral Commission, and this is a very serious issue. There are Scotland questions on 11 July, and I expect and anticipate that he will raise the question then, which would be the appropriate point.

I am very aware and very concerned that schools in Scotland break up sooner than schools in other parts of the United Kingdom. As I promised I would, I have sought a childcare solution for Scottish Members, and I understand from feedback that it is not exactly what they wanted. I am keen to try to help with this, and I do understand. It is difficult for all of us when we want to spend time with our children in the holidays, and I am keen to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to discuss what more we can do to facilitate some of their children being able to spend a bit of time enjoying themselves here while, at the same time, having time with their parents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) is sporting a kind of England tie, and we should hear from the fellow. His tie is very natty indeed.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Britain has a record number of outstanding breweries, including four in my constituency and the excellent Hook Norton Brewery in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), whom I am meeting this afternoon. Might we have time for a debate on the opportunities after Brexit to restructure beer duty in order to support not only our excellent brewers, but our vital community pubs?

Andrea Leadsom: I know my hon. Friend chairs the all-party group on beer, which promotes great UK beers. I have a number of brewers in my constituency who have had the pleasure of bringing a barrel to the Strangers’ Bar here in Parliament. We are all big supporters of brewers in our own areas, and he is right to point out the opportunities Brexit provides. These beers are superb UK products, and we need to do everything we can to promote the excellent and rising exports of British food and drink as we leave the EU.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): In the aftermath of yesterday’s events in Russia, I am just wondering whether the Leader of the House can explain to the House what the word “schadenfreude” means.

I know this is a big ask, but I really would welcome it if, through the usual channels, we could get an early indication of the time allocations for the Backbench Business Committee in both the run-up to the summer recess and the two weeks in September, as we have to try to plan ahead for those eventualities. Lastly, yesterday I had the privilege of hosting a very successful lobby by providers, workers and clients of the care sector for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. There is a big problem with back pay for sleep-in workers, which has not yet been resolved. May we have an early indication or a statement from the Government about how that is being dealt with and what he suggests be the solution on back pay.

Andrea Leadsom: I feel I should say that I felt quite sad for Germany, as it was a difficult blow yesterday—

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Really?

Andrea Leadsom: Sorry, but I did feel some sympathy there. We will absolutely take on board the hon. Gentleman’s request for as much notice as possible of Backbench Business Committee days in the run-up to the recess and in our September sitting. I will take that away and discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip. The hon. Gentleman also raises the important issue of adults with learning disabilities. He will be aware that the subject has serious implications for the charities sector, with many organisations facing significant bills should what he suggests be the solution on back pay. The Government are looking carefully at the issue, which could be a useful subject for a Backbench Business Committee debate—he could apply to himself for that. I know the Government would welcome any debate on a resolution to this very tricky issue.
Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Being a footballing aficionado yourself, Mr Speaker, you will know that England’s progress in the World cup has spawned a patriotic, heartwarming display of flags in homes across the nation. It is time that Government caught up with the people. The Department for International Trade was the first this morning to raise the cross of St George. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to come here to assure us that all Government buildings will fly the flag, as this is an urgent matter? You know that this is about even more than sport. When that which unites us is greater than any division, communal pride and shared endeavour nourish the national interest and nurture the common good.

Mr Speaker: How very beautiful.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is never short of things to say about anything, which is a great relief to the House. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, it is her intention to fly the England flag over Downing Street not only today, but next year when the women’s world championships take place. That is important, and I entirely support the equality there, but I also encourage all other Whitehall Departments to consider whether they, too, can support England in the crucial battle this evening.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for what she said and the right hon. Gentleman for his characteristically eloquent, almost poetical, inquiry. In response to what the Leader of the House said on the Government’s behalf, I am keen that the House shows its support for the England team in the World cup, as I would be if any of the other home nations were competing, as I hope that they will be in 2022. I have therefore decided that the House of Commons will indeed fly the St George’s flag for the next England game, which will be on Monday 2 July or Tuesday 3 July, dependent on St George’s flag for the next England game, which will be decided that the House of Commons will indeed fly the St George’s flag for the next England game, which will be on Monday 2 July or Tuesday 3 July, dependent on the outcome of today’s match against Belgium. I know that I speak for the whole House in wishing the three lions the best of luck tonight.

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

Mr Speaker: I have been mugging up on the hon. Gentleman’s illustrious local government career over the past half an hour. Llwchwr and Lliw unitary district council benefitted from the hon. Gentleman’s membership of it between 1972 and 1979, when he was an august lecturer at Swansea University. I am sure the hon. Gentleman is pleased to be reminded of that important part of his distinguished career, and the House is now also aware of it.

Mr Sheerman: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also thank all the people who put together that great exhibition, from which we will all benefit. Quite soon, we ought also to celebrate the emancipation of working-class men—men without property—who waited a long, long time to get the vote. It was only in 1892 that Kier Hardy was the first Labour MP elected—ironically for West Ham.

I have a very serious question about health. Yes, we have had some interesting and positive news about there being more money for the health service, but may we have a focused debate on the way in which so many health trusts and communities are blighted by bad private finance initiatives? They are not going to go away and many areas, including Huddersfield, will never overcome the barriers that we have to good health provision until someone sorts out the PFI burden.

Andrea Leadsom: I heartily agree with you, Mr Speaker: were any of the other nations of the United Kingdom in the World cup, we would of course all be shouting for them. I absolutely agree with that. I also wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should celebrate the right of working-class men to get the vote. I am afraid that that is slightly overshadowed, albeit understandably, by the first women getting the vote, but he is nevertheless right to point out the significant triumph of working-class men getting the vote in that same Act. I join him in commending them.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about health and the issues relating to PFIs and what they have done. I remember that when I was a Back-Bench member of the Treasury Committee, we published a widely viewed report, which included a wide range of participation, on PFI and some of the horrors of how it had damaged finances, not only in the health sector but in schools and so on. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that great efforts were made to see what could be done to ensure that future PFIs did not suffer from the same problems. I encourage him to raise the issue at Treasury questions next Tuesday, because although he asked about PFIs for hospitals, it is the Treasury that can actually influence what happens with PFIs, both retrospectively and going forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to the fact that Tottenham or ex-Tottenham players are scoring almost all the goals in the World cup.

I wish to raise a serious point: the impending closure of the Swaminarayan School in Neasden means that 1,000 pupils and their parents will lose the school of their choice, and Hindu education in north-west London will be extremely damaged as a result. Will my right hon. Friend find time in the Government agenda for a debate on religious education, because parents should be able to choose the type of education that they wish for their children?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important constituency matter. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate about the particular school he mentioned. The need for parental choice is of course absolutely key. However, I am sure he would join me in celebrating the fact that now, overall, 1.9 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, and 89% of schools in England are now rated as good or outstanding, up from 68% in 2010. This Government have taken education in a good and strong direction, including in respect of parental choice, but I encourage my hon. Friend to seek to speak to Ministers directly.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can we have a statement on the Government’s support for business? I note that the Leader of the Conservatives in the Welsh Assembly has resigned following his inflammatory remarks about Airbus after it expressed its reasonable concerns about Brexit. Who would have thought that senior Conservatives would turn their back on business?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is this Government and it is the Conservatives who, over the years, have always backed businesses. We have presided over lowering corporation tax rates to ensure that businesses are more competitive and presided over reducing regulation that creates enormous burdens for businesses. As I said to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) when she made her accusations about business in the run-up to Brexit, it is this Government who have been listening to businesses all the way through. It is the reason why we have sought an implementation period for our departure from the European Union to ensure that there is continuity for business. That is vital. There is enormous engagement going on, and that will continue to be the case as we seek a good trade deal that works for businesses in the UK as well as for those in the EU 27.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): On Saturday, Forres will host the European pipe band championships for the final time. Every year since 2013, when it was first held, more than 20,000 visitors have gone to Grant park for this event, and the natural amphitheatre makes it very highly regarded by competitors from around the world. Can we have a debate on the success of piping at Forres, which will also allow us the opportunity to congratulate the army of volunteers who have put in so much effort to make this a truly world-class event?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend is raising what sounds like an excellent constituency event. May I particularly commend him, because, as an assistant referee, he could right now be taking part in the World cup, but he has chosen instead to be here in this place representing his constituency? I join him in congratulating all those involved in the European pipe band championships. I know how successful they have been with countless hard-working volunteers. More than 100 bands from across the world are due to attend on Saturday. I do wish them all a fantastic day.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is really not good enough simply to cancel the Swansea Bay lagoon and put the whole issue of lagoon technology for renewable energy at risk. North Wales also has proposals for a lagoon, which, following the Hendry review, is now completely up in the air. Will the Minister give time for a debate on whether lagoon technology has a future?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have looked very carefully at the issue of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, and at the other projects as well. As he will be aware, the Swansea Bay proposal would cost £1.3 billion to build, but would have produced only around 0.15% of the electricity that we use each year, which is a capital cost more than three times as much per unit of electricity as Hinkley Point C. Therefore, it simply was not good value for the taxpayer.

However, I stress that this Government have been absolutely committed to success in Wales, as demonstrated, I think, by abolishing tolls on the Severn bridge by the end of 2018; by the city and growth deals that have been signed for Cardiff and Swansea; by the deals that are being negotiated for north Wales; by the Government’s willingness to look at a deal for mid-Wales as well; and by the £150 million for the Swansea Bay city deal, which will deliver £1.3 billion of investment to the region and 9,000 jobs. This Government are fully committed to the success of Wales commensurate with good value for taxpayers’ money.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Next Friday, 63 Bills will be offered for Second Reading. None of them will be debated. Four of them are in my name: one to end voter fraud; another to abolish hospital car parking charges; another to have a Business of the House Committee; and another to have an independence day bank holiday on 23 June. A senior Whip will jump up and object to all those Bills. It is a complete farce. Does the Leader of the House agree that the private Member’s Bill system needs reform, and that the Government will continue to block every private Member’s Bill that does not have a Second Reading debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The Government are fully committed to the success of both the process and the reality of private Members’ Bills. The number of PMBs passed under this Government and the coalition Government far exceeds that of the last Labour Government. In the 2005 Parliament, 22 private Members’ Bills received Royal Assent. In 2010, 31 private Members’ Bills received Royal Assent; and if we include the 2015 to 2017 Parliament, the number is more than double that achieved in 2005. There is no question but that there are some very important private Members’ Bills, including the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill of the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and the Stalking Protection Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). These are very important measures that the Government are pleased to support. The Select Committee on Procedure reviewed the PMB process in the last Parliament and the Government responded to its reports. Should the Committee choose to look further at the PMB process, the Government and I will of course look closely at its recommendations.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On the football theme, with a German husband, obviously last night was fairly traumatic in our household, although it does spare me from having to watch another several weeks of football. Quite unexpectedly for Conservative Members, let me say that we wish the England team well. They are having great success and it is great to see them not suffering from being put away in military camps, as has been the case in the past.

On a serious note, the scandal in Gosport has again raised the issue of whistleblowers and their importance to patient safety. May we have a debate in Government time on the reform of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998? The legislation is 20 years old and frankly does not provide any protection to whistleblowers; when they come forward in good faith, they discover that they are throwing their careers down the pan. That is wrong and it is dangerous.

Andrea Leadsom: With regards to the hon. Lady’s remarks about the football, may I say that every cloud has a silver lining?

Dr Whitford: My husband will not be happy if he hears this.

Andrea Leadsom: I did say that I felt very sorry for the Germans; the hon. Lady can pass that on to him. I thank her for confirming that she and Members of the
Scottish National party wish the England team luck. That is no surprise to hon. Members across the House. We are a family with ancient, historic, cultural and familial links that we should celebrate at all times.

The hon. Lady raised an incredibly important point about the Gosport review and the independent panel’s report. As she knows, the Health Secretary came to update the House on the findings of the Gosport review as soon as he was able last week. I am sure that there will be further reports from Ministers on how we intend to tackle the matter, but the hon. Lady makes a very sensible suggestion, which I encourage her to raise directly with Ministers.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It has been a particularly unpleasant summer for some residents in towns such as Thatcham and Newbury, and in the area of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), because of illegal encampments by Travellers. Would my right hon. Friend consider an opportunity in this House for colleagues who have experienced similar problems in their constituencies to raise the need for a change in the law? The situation is totally unacceptable for law-abiding people whose lives have been made a misery by the selfish and illegal actions of these individuals.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an issue, unfortunately, crops up time and again in this place, as many hon. and right hon. Members have grave concerns about illegal Traveller encampments in their constituencies. He will be aware that we have recently had debates on the subject, both in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall. The Government are now looking at enforcement, or whether more powers are needed to enable local authorities to deal effectively with what is a really serious problem for local communities.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week I asked the Leader of the House to outline how the Government would update us on progress on their serious violence strategy. She was not entirely sure on the Government would update us on progress on their inquiry into adverse childhood experiences? I would certainly support a debate on adverse childhood experiences.

Andrea Leadsom: I would certainly support a debate on adverse childhood experiences. In fact, someone I have worked with for many years who is a real expert in that subject was here only this week for a Select Committee inquiry into adverse childhood experiences and the impact on early brain development. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the very serious issue of the impact of appalling early experiences on young people who then find themselves on the conveyor belt into a life of crime. I would welcome a debate on that. I have said to her that Ministers will come forward with further updates, and that remains the case. If she wants to write to me, I can take it up on her behalf.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): In my constituency and across the wider NHS Grampian area, there has been a surge in deaths over the past year linked to the use of the drug alprazolam, a tranquiliser that is commonly marketed under the brand name of Xanax. The drug is not available on the NHS, but an investigation by my local newspaper, the Evening Express, showed that the drug can be obtained within minutes online. The rate of fatalities in north-east Scotland has been described as a public health emergency, and while the biggest rises were in areas such as Grampian, Police Scotland has said that this is a national problem that needs to be addressed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the House must debate this urgent matter?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that important and concerning issue. In Scotland, health and justice are devolved matters. However, misuse of drugs such as Xanax, which is the brand name for alprazolam, is a cause for concern across the whole of the UK, and we remain vigilant to take any measures expensive process for small businesses. Some create very little waste, which can be managed alongside domestic refuse at no additional cost to the business or the environment. Can we have a debate on Bolton Council’s extreme interpretation of the law, which results in less recycling, more landfill, small business fines and harassment?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise that important constituency issue. Businesses are responsible for finding their own waste operator, so that they can choose one whose charges fit their budget. Some councils collect business waste but will charge for that. He is right that we intend to review how business waste is handled. We want businesses to recycle more and to play their part in reducing waste to landfill. More detail of that will be in the resources and waste strategy that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will publish in autumn.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): In terms of the loyalty test, this London Scot always supports England—except when they play Scotland. I hope the whole House wishes the Prime Minister well in negotiations with Monsieur Barnier; it is not the best day to be in Brussels, but that is another matter.

Can we have a statement from the Ministry of Justice on the operation of first-tier tribunals, especially with regard to section 24 powers, which appear to be failing so badly? I have written and have failed on four occasions so far to secure an Adjournment debate on the subject, so anything the Leader of the House can do would be very much appreciated.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting on the record his views on the football prowess of the United Kingdom. Perhaps we ought to have a survey of all Members, so that everyone can put their priorities on the record. This is fast becoming a serious and important issue.

The hon. Gentleman raises a key point about first-tier tribunals. There are Justice questions on 10 July, and I encourage him to raise that directly with Ministers then, or if he wants to write to me, I can take it up on his behalf.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Responsible waste management is vital to increase recycling and reduce landfill, but it ought not to be a tortuous or overly
[Andrea Leadsom]
deemed necessary to address those issues. For example, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is currently running a behavioural change campaign to warn people about the dangers of buying drugs online. He is right to raise that, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can take it up directly with Ministers.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Last week, I attended a fantastic assembly at St Vincent’s RC school in Norden in my constituency, and I pay tribute to all the work done by the pupils and teachers on the Send My Friend to School “Make Schools Safe” campaign. May we have a debate in Government time on such campaigns, and on how we can help our international partners achieve sustainable development goal 4 on quality education for all?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating St Vincent’s school on its work. Many young people are taking part in these fantastic campaigns. She will be aware that we will have International Development questions next Wednesday—4 July—and I encourage her to raise the question of what more can be done directly with Ministers then.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): A recent report provided evidence that trade could be increased by £12 billion and 150,000 jobs created in the north of England if seven major ports, including Immingham in my constituency, were given free port status, which would clearly be a massive boost to the economy post-Brexit. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time to explore these great opportunities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly interested in the issue of free ports, and my hon. Friend is right to raise the potential of ports such as Immingham. We will have Transport questions on Thursday 5 July, when he may like to take that up directly with Ministers.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Transport Committee’s report out today confirms that regions such as Yorkshire and the Humber have not received a fair share of rail funding for years and that the formula used by the Department for Transport is unfair to northern regions. May we have a debate in Government time on what exactly the Government will do to remedy this unfair situation and give regions such as mine the transport system that we deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: We in the Government are embarking on the biggest rail investment programme since the Victorian era. Thanks to our £48 billion investment in the rail network, we are rebuilding stations up and down the country, improving the carbon footprint and enabling many hundreds of thousands more passengers to use the rail network. The hon. Lady raises a very important issue about the fairness of infrastructure spending in the different regions. She will be aware that we have Transport questions on 5 July, when she may want to raise this specific issue with Ministers.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last week, along with several other Members of the House, I was able to attend the royal highland show. May we have time in this place for a debate to allow us to congratulate the organisers of the show, particularly the food producers, farmers and other exhibitors who put on such a fantastic show of British farming?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in the royal highland show. Every year, the show demonstrates the very best of the UK’s world-leading food and drink sector. It is a testament to all those involved that such large crowds flock to it. I gather that nearly 200,000 visitors attended this year’s show. There is no doubt that it is the premier fixture in Scotland’s farming calendar, and I understand that it generates over £200 million for businesses.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I warmly welcome your announcement about flying the St George’s flag over this building next week. I, too, was sorry to see Germany exit the World cup yesterday, mainly because I had Germany in the parliamentary Labour party sweepstake.

Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the official opening of the Denby Dale and District men’s shed in my constituency recently? The volunteers there are absolutely phenomenal. Whether it is to go along and do a few crafts or simply have a cuppa and a chinwag, these men’s sheds and men’s clubs do wonderful work, particularly in addressing the issue of men’s mental health and social isolation. May we have a debate on what men’s clubs bring to our society?

Andrea Leadsom: I am deeply sorry that the hon. Lady has lost her stake. I am sure it was not too great a stake, but she probably had high hopes after drawing Germany in that sweepstake.

The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. Men’s sheds do amazing work to try to improve men’s mental health. This is often forgotten, but as we know, a key reason for death, particularly in young men, is suicide due to mental health problems. I absolutely join her in congratulating all those involved in the men’s shed work in her constituency, and I wish them every success with it in the future.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Nether Whitacre Parish Council in my constituency has highlighted the challenges its rural villages face from non-compliance with planning regulations in the green belt, saying that regular abusers of the planning system ignore requests from the local planning authority to remove temporary buildings. Following the recent Government consultation, can we have an urgent debate on how planning enforcement powers can be strengthened to further protect our countryside from unauthorised development?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for his area. As he knows, local planning authorities have a wide range of enforcement powers and strong penalties for non-compliance available to them to tackle unauthorised development. It is for them to decide how and when to use those powers, but as we have discussed, the recent consultation sought views on what, if any, further powers might be useful, particularly to help bring proceedings to quicker conclusions. We are looking at the responses to the consultation, and an announcement on the way forward will be made as soon as possible.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Transport Committee, which published its report this morning, says that the “Government must increase support for regions short-changed on rail spending”.

It also criticises the cancellation of rail electrification schemes. With the cancellation carnage at TransPennine and the already cut-down service under the emergency timetable from Northern Rail, and given that the Prime Minister has not yet responded to the One North campaign by northern newspapers, can the Secretary of State for Transport please come to the House to give a statement about what is happening about rail in the north?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to speak up for her area. She will recall that the Secretary of State for Transport was here just last week for an Opposition day debate to talk about the rail situation, and he was keen to answer all questions pertaining to rail. We have Transport questions next Thursday, on 5 July, and I encourage her to take this up directly with him then.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I want to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend—he really should be right honourable by now—the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) about childcare. No sooner will we come back from the conference recess than Scottish schools will go off on their October mid-term breaks, sometimes for two weeks. I would be very grateful if the Leader of the House were willing to meet me and others with an interest to see how the family room could be used for that purpose, rather than, as often happens, as a mobile office or, indeed, a World cup viewing room. If we could have that meeting, it would be appreciated.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), I am keen to help provide a solution to this problem and would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends to discuss it further.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I drew Panama in our office sweepstake, so my Sunday was not so good—I cup doth not runneth over. As the World cup continues, will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Bristol’s Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls, who have grown from a mates’ football kick-about to a loved Bristol sports club, social organisation and campaigning force, showing the world, through their activities, how football truly helps both world peace and community spirit?

Andrea Leadsom: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would be delighted to lose her stake, because it enabled England to face Belgium this evening, but nevertheless I am of course delighted to join her in congratulating her local community football group. It is true that sports of all sorts, but particularly football clubs, can engage young people and communities and do so much for their local communities. I wish them every success.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, send my best wishes to the English team in the World cup and welcome your initiative, Mr Speaker, to fly the flag. Across Northern Ireland, flags are flying everywhere—for a different reason, of course, but none the less they are flying, and our support for the English team is there.

Recent research conducted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide demonstrates that more than 1,000 people were killed in attacks by Fulani herder militia in farming communities in the five months between 1 January and 1 May. The Fulani herder militia is believed to have murdered more men, women and children in 2015 to 2017 than Boko Haram. The 2017 global terrorism index estimates that 60,000 people have been killed in the violence since 2001, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced and crops and livestock worth billions have been destroyed. There is concern that there could be full-scale civil war. If ever there was a need for a debate, this is the time.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his confirmation of support for the England football team. That was not in any doubt, but we are grateful for the confirmation. He raises, as he often does, an appalling example of human rights abuses, which are of grave concern to the House wherever and whenever they occur around the world. He may like to take the matter up at International Development questions on Wednesday 4 July, in order to hear directly from Ministers what the United Kingdom can do to protect the human rights of people around the world.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As one of 38 Co-operative MPs in the House—we are the third-largest party grouping—I look forward to celebrating Co-operatives Fortnight, which kicks off on Monday, by visiting the Hawthorn housing co-operative in my constituency. I have been reading with great interest the Co-operative UK’s publication about the co-operative economy in 2018, which highlights the huge breadth of co-operative movements and mutual societies across the United Kingdom. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in Government time about the huge importance of co-operative mutuals for the growth of our economy in the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely applaud the hon. Gentleman for raising the value of the co-operative movement across the UK. I am a big fan of credit unions, which operate on a similar basis; they do so much to help people learn to save as well as borrow. The work that they do is incredibly valuable. I join him in congratulating the co-operative movement on all its efforts, and encourage him to seek a Back-Bench debate, so that he may share with other hon. Members their own experiences.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): My constituent, Ms Tomasiak, applied for an EU registration certificate last May, after which her documents, including a Polish passport, were lost when the Home Office erroneously sent them to the wrong address. May we therefore have a statement or a debate in Government time regarding the issue of compensation payments, with a view to reconsidering why there is no process to forward-fund the costs incurred by families challenged by financial circumstances, in obtaining photographs and replacing documents, and their travel expenses and loss of earnings, in similar such cases?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning constituency issue, and he is absolutely right to do so. I know that Home Office Ministers would be concerned to hear about it, and I encourage him to take it up directly with them; or if he wants to write to me directly, I can do so on his behalf.
Adult Social Care: Long-term Funding

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Mr Speaker: We now come to the first Select Committee statement. Mr Clive Betts will speak on the joint report of the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for up to 10 minutes, during which, I remind the House, no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Clive Betts to respond to these in turn.

12.7 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time today for me to present the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Health and Social Care Committee joint report on long-term funding of adult social care.

In 2017, the then Communities and Local Government Committee undertook a lengthy inquiry into adult social care. We concluded that spending on social care would need to rise significantly in the coming years, and that after successive failed attempts at reform, political parties across the spectrum needed to be involved in the process of reaching a solution. With that in mind, we returned to the issue in a joint inquiry with the Health and Social Care Committee, aiming to identify funding reforms that would be supported by the public and politicians, and to feed its findings into the Green Paper. I thank all members of both Committees for the constructive role they have played, and particularly the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, who is so knowledgeable on these matters and with whom it has been a genuine pleasure to work on this inquiry.

To find out the public’s views on how social care should be funded, we commissioned a citizens’ assembly, which I understand is the first held by the UK Parliament. Following a process of learning, deliberating and decision making, which took place over two weekends in April and May, a representative sample of nearly 50 members of the public was asked how best to fund social care. We have listened carefully to the assembly members’ views. They have been vital in informing our thinking, and are reflected throughout our report. We have taken the unusual step of specifically addressing our recommendations to both sides of the political divide, asking that both Government and Opposition Front Benchers accept them.

What are the challenges facing social care and what funding is required to address them? The critical state of social care and the very serious consequences for people who receive care, and those who do not, and their unpaid carers and families, as well as the NHS, is well documented. The evidence was clear that the combination of rising demand and costs combined with reductions in funding to local authorities has placed the social care system under very great and unsustainable strain.

Despite the welcome additional funding provided by the Government in recent years, local authorities face a funding gap of around £2.5 billion in 2020. This has been confirmed by the National Audit Office, the King’s

Fund and the Nuffield Trust, as well as the Local Government Association. The consequences are extremely serious and widespread, leading to people going without the care they need, and the time and quality of care not being sufficient for many who receive it, leading to unpaid carers having to step into the breach and placing significant pressures on care providers and the care workforce.

A witness to the inquiry, Sir Andrew Dilnot, chair of the 2011 Dilnot commission, told us that the system was consequently now at risk of “fairly significant disaster”, which were very strong words indeed. We concluded that considerable extra funding in the order of many billions of pounds would be needed in the coming years for the following reasons.

We need to fill the funding gap that I just referred to and we then need to provide additional funding to meet future demand. The personal social services research unit at the London School of Economics projects that spending on both social services for older people and younger adults will more than double by 2014, even without the improvements to the service that we suggest. It is also important to meet the care needs of a wider group of people—not just those whose needs are critical or substantial, but those who have moderate needs that are currently largely unmet. Age UK estimates that around 1 million who need care currently do not get it. Finally, and very importantly, we need to ensure that the care provided is good care from a stable, well-paid and well-trained workforce and viable care providers.

The difficult question for the Government and the Opposition to grapple with is where the additional funding for adult social care and social care for people of a working age with disabilities should come from, what it should be spent on, and how the care should be delivered. On care provision, we are strongly of the view that the responsibility for the delivery of social care should continue to rest with local councils at a local level. Social care provision should not, however, be seen in isolation. There is a need for better integration at a local level particularly within the NHS, as well as housing services. After all, most people receiving care get it in their homes. Integration should be seen not as a matter of bureaucratic convenience, but as a way of improving the care that individuals receive. The integrated care partnerships and health and wellbeing boards have an important role to play in that.

Our citizens’ assembly members expressed strong support for a social care system that, like the NHS, is free at the point of use. We acknowledge that this would increase costs substantially and be unlikely to be affordable immediately. We believe, however, that it is an ultimate objective for the personal care element of social care to be delivered free to everyone who needs it, and that accommodation costs should continue to be paid on a means-tested basis. This direction of travel should begin with the extension of free personal care to those deemed to have critical needs.

Now for the important question: where should the funding come from? Given the scale of the additional funding that is likely to be needed, which I have explained, we recommend that a combination of different fundraising measures are needed at local and national levels. At a local level, there should be a continuation for the foreseeable future of the existing local government revenue streams. We recommend that, in 2020, this funding is enhanced.
through using the additional revenue from 75% business rate retention, rather than the Government’s proposal to use the money to replace grants such as the public health grant. In the medium term, we recommend a reform of the council tax valuations and bands to bring them up to date. As other funding streams develop, the contribution from council tax and business rates to social care funding could fall, allowing councils to better fund other important services.

However, local government funding will only ever be one part of the solution for social care, given the scale of the challenge. It is clear that extra revenue will also need to be raised nationally to be spent on local provision. The citizens’ assembly was strongly in favour of any extra taxation being earmarked, wanting the clear assurance that the money raised would be spent on social care. We therefore recommend that an additional earmarked contribution, described as a “social care premium”, should be introduced, to which employers, as well as employees, would contribute. For fairness, it would be paid on earnings above a threshold and with the current national insurance limit lifted. We suggest that this premium could either be as an additional element to national insurance, which would ensure the accountability desired by the public and the citizens’ assembly, to be placed in an appropriately named and dedicated fund, and regularly and independently audited, or be paid into independent insurance funds, similar to the German model.

We strongly believe that a funding solution must fall fairly between generations and therefore recommend that those aged under 40 should be exempt from the social care premium, and that it should also be paid by those who are still working after the age of 65. We also recommend that a specified additional amount of inheritance tax should be levied on all estates above a certain threshold and capped at a percentage of the total value. This is intended to avoid the catastrophic costs for some individuals, who currently have to lose the vast majority of their assets, including their homes, to pay for care costs. It would pool the risk and spread the burden more fairly, a key recommendation of the citizens’ assembly. My view is that, if everyone who can afford it pays something, no one should have to lose everything.

After successive attempts at reform, the forthcoming social care Green Paper must be the catalyst for achieving a fair, long-term and sustainable settlement. It also ought to recognise the care needs of those of working age with disabilities, as well as the care needs of the elderly. To ensure that, we recommend that our work should now be taken forward by a cross-party parliamentary commission.

I say, on behalf of both Select Committees, to Government and Opposition Front Benchers that if we, on a cross-party, cross-Committee basis, can unanimously reach difficult decisions and make clear recommendations, can they not do the same? Use our proposals as a basis for building the wider consensus that we need to create a long-term, sustainable funding solution for those who need care now and in the future.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank my co-Chair for the dedicated work that he has put into this joint report, as well as all members of both Committees and our wonderful supporting Committee teams. Like him, I thank not only all those who took part in the citizens’ assembly and those who advised and supported them, but the very many people, and their loved ones, who depend on social care, who wrote to us and whom we visited on our Committee visit. They told us moving stories about the level of unmet need and the consequences, both for themselves and their families.

The situation could not be more stark. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the NHS next week, would my hon. Friend say more about the impact on the NHS if we fail to address the unmet need in social care?

Mr Betts: I thank the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Health Committee—I think on this occasion, my hon. Friend, because we have worked on a friendly basis on this inquiry. She is absolutely right. One of the important recommendations is about trying to extend the scope of care provision to include those with moderate needs. If we provide care for them, it is quite likely that we will stop them getting into the substantial and critical phase and ending up in hospital in the first place. In terms of the NHS, it is about stopping people getting into hospital by getting them proper care and having care available for people in hospital, so that they do not have delayed discharges. In those two ways, that can be beneficial. Of course, we can also join up services. Can the NHS district nurse who goes into someone’s home and looks at their needs not assess their care needs at the same time? Can we not get that sort of joined-up approach?

It was remiss of me not to thank the staff, as the hon. Lady did, and I will name Laura and Tamsin. The work they did on this was exceptional. To produce a report of this quality in the time available was absolutely first-class, and we should congratulate them on it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I thank the Chairs and the members of the Select Committees for their work on the report, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for his statement introducing it. The key points from the report for me are that in its present state the care system is not fit to respond to current needs let alone predicted future needs, and that spending on social care needs to rise. Next week is the 70th birthday of social care, as well as of the NHS, but there is no funding settlement and no celebrations for social care. Does my hon. Friend agree that the time for a funding settlement for social care is now or at least soon, not years down the road?

Mr Betts: Yes, I completely agree with that. We have got to get on with it. If we agreed everything now, it would probably take two or three years to put it in place. That is why we suggested the stop-gap measure of the extra business rates in 2020 being made available for local authorities. We thought that was a very important solution. If we get it right, we can have stability for the long term. The Germans did this over 20 years ago. They have a stable system and it works. They have just put extra money into it with general public support, because everyone trusts the system. That is the position we have to get to.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for the way he chaired the Committee; it was very collegiate and consensual, which really helped
us in our deliberations. He may remember that when we visited a care home the residents and families of those receiving care accused this Parliament of a lack of courage for not having addressed this difficult issue for so long. Does he agree that there is a real sense of urgency? When the Government produce a Green Paper in the autumn, we need to get on with it. There is no reason why we cannot move this forward quite quickly. As he said, Germany has done it since 1994. Frankly, it shames this country that Germany has had a good system in place for so long, while we have not.

Mr Betts: I completely agree. If we are still talking about this in two or three years’ time we will have failed. We have to get some decisions and get on with it. As politicians, we are often very good at coming up with ways to spend money. In this report we have actually come up with ways to raise money, which is the difficult part. We have done the heavy lifting for both the Government and the Opposition Front Benches. We now say, “We’ve handed the pass over to you. Get on and run with it and make it work.”

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): If, too, welcome this cross-Committee report and note that it aspires to provide free personal care, as we have in Scotland, and to extend it to those in need under 65, which we will start next April. While that has significant costs, does the hon. Gentleman agree with the assessment of the Scottish experience by the King’s Fund and the Health Foundation, which suggested that overall it saves money, because people can remain in their own homes rather than care homes and rather than being admitted to hospital?

Mr Betts: I saw the King’s Fund report and I have seen the analysis. That was an aspiration eventually. However, the Select Committees’ felt that the immediate pressures of the funding gap, which will grow if we do not do anything about it—because of the demographics over the next few years, the fact that we are not meeting the needs of those with moderate care needs, the fact that we are not paying our workforce properly and that many care providers are in financial difficulties—mean that those issues have to be addressed and then, eventually, we can move on to the free care aspiration set out in the report over the longer period.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his statement, and both Select Committees on their report. He said that if everyone contributes something, we should be able to sort out the funding problem. He put great emphasis on the need for a social care premium and praised the German model. In the report, he specifically says that under 40s should be exempt from the social care premium. The argument from the older generation will be that they have paid taxes throughout their lives, so why should they be unfairly burdened? What is the experience in Germany with regard to the social care premium? Does Germany exempt people under 40?

Mr Betts: It is a difficult decision. Germany does not exempt people under 40, but there are other tweaks to the system. For example, people without children pay extra and people who are not working pay extra in retirement because they do not have an employer contribution. We have not just mirrored the German system absolutely. We have taken elements from it, which I think is quite right. Japan’s system is not dissimilar and it does restrict payments to those over 40. We have looked at different systems. It is a challenge, but in the end we felt that there were considerable pressures on younger people at this point in time: family pressures, housing pressures, job pressures. We therefore felt that to start at 40 was a reasonable benchmark, bearing in mind that for the vast majority of people it will mean that they will pay into the care system at some point in their lives.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it not remarkable, given the failure of successive Governments to grasp this nettle, that two cross-party Committees with Members holding widely different views and ideologies managed to agree a unanimous report? Does that not make it even more incumbent on the Government, given the acuteness of the crisis, to take this report very seriously and to implement its recommendations as quickly as possible?

Mr Betts: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. The fundamental question is: if we can do it, why can’t they? We have done the difficult part. We have set out a framework. Those on the Government Front Bench may not want to accept every detailed element of it, but it is there to work from. It should mean that we ought to be able to get to a consensus and an agreement about what should be done in a much shorter period of time than the years the Government were perhaps initially contemplating.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank both Chairs for the very constructive nature of the inquiry and the discussions around it, which have led to the report. We need to depoliticise this issue—that is critical—and I believe we have done that in the report. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most important parts of the report is not just the money it would raise, but how it would be delivered? Individuals who are in receipt of care can direct the payments to their loved ones, the people who know them best and can give them the best possible care. That care being delivered by the people who understand them best and love them the most will strengthen the social fabric of our communities.

Mr Betts: Yes, I completely agree. I could not refer to every specific recommendation in my statement. The hon. Gentleman is referring to paragraph 78 of the report, where it states that instead of care being delivered to people, they could receive a cash payment so their family members could do it in a way that suits them best.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the report and on the work of the Committees to deal with this very difficult subject. In my constituency, we have a problem with nursing care homes closing and being converted into residential care homes, because of a problem with recruitment and retention of nursing staff. I am glad he mentioned that the care being given has to be good quality. Will he say how the increased funding would help with that situation and give us the nursing home beds we need?
Mr Betts: It is about getting a well-paid, well-trained workforce. NHS staff who do a similar job get paid about 29% more. I am not saying they are well paid, but clearly social care staff are not well paid. That funding gap has to be addressed and people have to be properly paid. The Committees signed up to the Unison charter for the workforce in social care.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on their leadership on this issue. The inquiry’s report provides incontrovertible evidence of the crisis facing social care funding. I particularly welcome the recommendation that social care should be provided to those who need it free at the point of delivery, and the very practical recommendations for raising the additional funding we so urgently need. I come to the House from a meeting of supported housing providers, which provide housing for older people in my constituency and elsewhere in Southwark. All highlighted to me the increasing numbers of referrals they receive from older people who are being made homeless and suffering problems in the private rented sector. This problem is growing. The report highlights the importance of housing for the delivery of a sustainable social care system and I wonder whether my hon. Friend might just say a little bit about that now.

Mr Betts: Absolutely. Most people receive care in their own home. The Committee’s report on housing for older people looked at the nature of the home. It showed the importance of the warmth of the home and the ability to get around the home—trip hazards and so on. Means-testing for the disability facilities grant relates to means-testing for care provision and other benefits, so they need to be properly integrated. Another recommendation in the report was that where means tests exist, they need to be joined up together.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The economics of the sector are fluid. Does my hon. Friend agree that there has been a high turnover of ownership of care provider organisations? The Government need to monitor buyouts in the sector carefully, so that those living in care do not worry about who owns their home.

Mr Betts: Absolutely. The Committee did not discuss the ownership of care homes, but we did discuss the number of homes that had gone out of business or had been contracted back to local authorities. This is an ongoing and very real problem. We need not just a well-paid and well-trained workforce but viable care providers, so the money needs to be there for the providers as well as the workforce.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank the Chairs, the members and the staff of both Committees, and congratulate them on producing an exceptional document. I also congratulate them on their extremely collaborative approach to their work, which is incredibly refreshing. For too long this issue has been used as a political football to be kicked around, but I am afraid it is too late for that now. We no longer have that luxury; we must reach a sufficient settlement. As other Members have pointed out, successive Governments have failed to address this issue. The Committees’ consultative, collaborative and constructive approach has been very positive and has been warmly welcomed, as, indeed, has been their engagement with the citizens’ assembly.

As has been made clear by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, we want to integrate plans for social care with the new NHS plan that the Prime Minister announced recently. It would not make sense to publish it before the NHS plan has even been drafted, so our Green Paper will be published at the same time as the plan. It will cover the Government’s proposals on a wide range of social care issues, including, but not limited to, the need for the social care market to be sustainable for the future. It will also build on policies such as our “Carers action plan”: we will, for example, consult on proposals to provide better support for unpaid carers.

The report will be incredibly valuable to our work. It will enhance our plans for the Green Paper, and will ensure that it can offer people a sustainable future and the knowledge that as they approach their later years, they will do so in security and safety and with quality provision.

Mr Betts: Again, I thank all the members and staff of the Committees for their work. The challenge now lies with the Government and with Ministers. There should not be any more long grass out there to kick things into. We want to see Government and Opposition working together and starting to make the difficult decisions that need to be made for the benefit of the people who need the care, both the elderly and those of working age.
Leaving the EU: Parliamentary Scrutiny

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

12.32 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to present the sixth report of the Exiting the European Union Committee, on parliamentary scrutiny and approval of the withdrawal agreement and negotiations on a future partnership. I am grateful to all those who gave evidence to the Committee, including two Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union—and it is good to see a third here today. I am also grateful to the terrific team who support us in our work, and to all the members of the Committee. On occasion we are not able to agree on everything, but that is the nature of Brexit.

The Committee thought that it would be helpful to the House to set out the task that will face us as the process of leaving the European Union unfolds, and that is what the report covers. Let me say first that time is very tight. Even if we secure a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration at the October Council—and that must now be in doubt—the Committee will expect to take evidence from the Secretary of State as soon as possible thereafter so that we can report to the House. That would probably take us to about mid-November for Parliament’s debate and meaningful vote to approve the agreement. We recommend that the debate should last at least five days, which is the amount of time that was provided in 1971 for the House to debate whether we should join the common market.

This will be a very important moment, and the Committee believes that the debate will need to be managed in a way that gives the House an opportunity to express its opinion clearly. We recommend that the Business of the House motion should make it possible for the Speaker to select a series of different amendments, and we are asking the Procedure Committee to advise on how that could best be done.

If this House and the other place approve the withdrawal agreement, the Government will introduce a withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill to give effect to it in UK law. The Bill will have to receive Royal Assent before we leave the EU, because otherwise the UK would be bound by the agreement without the legislation to implement it. That would put the country potentially in breach of international law, and would create legal uncertainty for businesses and citizens.

We could have just three to four months, or approximately 60 to 70 sitting days, in which to pass the Bill. Given that it took more than 11 months for the European Withdrawal (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to complete its passage, that is not a lot of time for the scrutiny that will be required. We then need to add to that the 21-day CRAg process—which relates to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—for the ratification of treaties, which is likely to take place in parallel with the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, and the time required for other Bills to do with Brexit, and statutory instruments that will need to be passed before exit day. We shall be legislating for a new immigration system, a new customs system, new systems for agricultural support, a new legal basis for management of our fisheries, and lots of other things. When we consider all that, the scale of the task becomes very clear.

Now, let us imagine for a moment that the withdrawal agreement and political declaration are not finalised at the October Council. Given where we are, that would not be surprising. Indeed, the draft conclusions from the European Council suggest that there will not be a breakthrough in negotiations today or tomorrow. On the contrary, the EU is saying that we need to speed up the process—although I would observe that it takes two to move faster—and it wants much greater clarity about what the UK is seeking for the future partnership.

The fact that, two years after the referendum, Ministers have yet to reach agreement on what kind of customs arrangements they would like with our biggest, nearest and most important trading partner reminds us how much more is still to be done. It is also a cause of growing concern to business, as we have seen in the last couple of weeks, and there is still no agreement on the backstop to prevent the return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Today’s European Council was once billed as a “make or break” meeting on the Irish border, on which progress would be needed to keep the negotiations on track, but that does not seem likely either now.

If there is no agreement until November or the end of the year, that will leave even less time for Parliament properly to scrutinise the proposed deal and to put in place the required legislation by March 2019—and, of course, we are not the only Parliament that must approve the agreement. As the Committee heard from Guy Verhofstadt MEP last week, the European Parliament needs three months in which to consider and give its consent to the agreement before the EU can conclude it. He said that the Parliament must receive the deal by the end of this year, or it will not have enough time to vote on it by March next year.

Then we come to the meaningful vote in the House. If we approve the agreement, matters can progress, but what if we choose to place some conditions on our approval? What if we reject the agreement? What if the European Parliament rejects it? The Secretary of State has previously said that the House of Commons voting down the deal would mean the UK leaving without a deal, but the Committee does not accept that.

In considering an amendable motion, the House of Commons would have the opportunity to make its reasoning clear in any decision to reject the agreement or to place conditions on it. In such circumstances, the House would surely expect the Government to take full account, to seek to re-enter negotiations if required, and then to come back to the House with a further motion. That is why we say in our report that it is important for Parliament to be able to express its view clearly and advise the Government on how to proceed. The Government would then need to return to the House with any renegotiated text and resubmit the motion, because they cannot introduce the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill until Parliament approves the agreement.

The Committee remains concerned that the looming deadline of March next year leaves very little room for manoeuvre. We call on the Government to publish details of their intended legislative timetable, the publication dates of any White or Green Papers, and any contingency
plans for handling a no-deal outcome. We reiterate the recommendation in our third report that the Government should be prepared to seek a limited extension to the article 50 period in the event that substantive aspects of the future relationship remain to be agreed, or if there is a lack of parliamentary consent to the withdrawal agreement, or if there is no deal. However, we do recognise that it is by no means certain that the EU would respond positively to such a request.

Finally, I turn to the negotiations on the future relationship. Assuming that a withdrawal agreement and political declaration is concluded, we will have only 21 months from the date of our withdrawal to the end of the transition period in December 2020 in which to turn a political declaration into legal text on the future relationship and for such a treaty—and it could be more than one treaty—to be ratified. I think we all know that the negotiators will be dealing with a task that is frankly unparalleled in its scope and complexity and in the detail that will be required. There is a possibility that this will prove insufficient time to do all that work. We therefore call on the Government to seek that a mechanism be put into the withdrawal agreement for the extension of the transition period if that is required. We also call on the Government to ensure that Parliament is given a meaningful vote on the final text of the agreement with the EU that will cover the UK-EU relationship in the years ahead.

The report says:

“The debate on the motion for approval of the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration will be one of the most significant parliamentary debates in a generation.”

We all want to do that moment justice, and I hope that our report will assist the House in doing precisely that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The Government are pleased to welcome the statement made by the Chairman of the Exiting the EU Committee. The Government extend our thanks to the members of the Committee for the time and consideration that they have invested in producing this report and in reflecting on the issues that the Chairman has so ably and clearly set out. I look forward to reading the report and assure the Committee and the House that a Government response will be forthcoming in the usual way.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the Select Committee Chair for his statement and for his heroic efforts to reach consensus when at times that is never going to be possible. I also endorse wholeheartedly his gratitude for the efforts of the Committee staff, who have done a fantastic job in serving the Committee.

Paragraph 17 of the report points out that Parliament currently has a role in scrutinising any EU external agreements, including trade agreements. As things stand, when we start to negotiate trade deals on our own, there is no such role for Parliament in scrutinising those deals. Is the report saying that as a result of Brexit, the important parliamentary scrutiny of trade deals will be less than it is just now?

Hilary Benn: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing his report to the House and giving an oral statement. I hope that he does the same for all his subsequent reports. Clearly, he and his Committee are going to be very busy, especially from October onwards. What is his response to a scenario whereby either the European Parliament or the British Parliament sought to amend the withdrawal agreement while the other had approved it? What happens in those circumstances?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. We feel pretty busy already. I cannot promise that I will always make a statement on every one of our reports, because that is in the hands of the Backbench Business Committee.

The scenario that the hon. Gentleman describes is a possibility. It is not unknown in negotiations where two parties are discussing an agreement for them to report back to their members—in this case, Members of the European Parliament and Members of the House of Commons—and then return to the table and say, “I’m sorry but it didn’t go down terribly well with the members in this respect. Can we talk about what we are going to do about this?” It is possible that that situation might arise. That is why we thought it important to set out in the report what we think ought to happen. We say that Parliament should be able to express its view—that we in Parliament should be able to offer advice—and the Government should listen to that, but clearly it would be for the Government to go back and negotiate.

This also links to the recommendation about an amendable motion. When the Secretary of State came to give evidence, I asked him, “Will the motion to approve the withdrawal agreement be amendable”, and he indicated that it would be. I think he said, “Show me a motion that can’t be”; I paraphrase. In those circumstances, Parliament might want to say, “The whole thing’s fine”, or it might want to say, “All these bits are okay but we have reservations about this, or we’d like to see that included.” My personal view is that Parliament should be entitled to do that. The view of the Committee is that Parliament should be able to offer advice to the Government and then the Government will have to respond. If the agreement is not approved—if conditions are put on its approval—in the House, any Government, in any circumstances, on either side of the negotiations, would have to reflect on that and work out what they were going to do.
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): May I ask my right hon. Friend about the section of the report dealing with the financial settlement, from paragraph 58 onwards? The House and the country have been given the impression that we are going to make a very large payment of up to €40 billion to the European Union on condition that we secure a favourable agreement about our future trading relationship. How likely is it that next March we will find ourselves obligated under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, which will be legally binding, to make the payment, yet at that point have no legal certainty at all about our future trading relationship?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question and for his sterling service on the Committee. That is indeed a possibility due to the way that the draft withdrawal agreement is constructed at the moment. The commitment to pay the outstanding moneys that we owe, which the Government have accepted, is part of that agreement and not conditional on what may transpire in the negotiations on the future partnership. There has been some debate on this subject; indeed, we questioned Ministers on it when they appeared before the Committee. We say in the report:

“We note that the Government has not yet secured a clause in the Withdrawal Agreement linking the financial settlement to the satisfactory conclusion of negotiations on the framework for the future relationship. We call on the Government to confirm whether the inclusion of such a clause is one of its negotiating objectives.”

We wait to see what the Government say in response. As things stand at the moment, the commitment has been made to pay the money as part of the withdrawal agreement, and it is not linked to the future partnership and the treaty negotiations on that, which we hope will be concluded by December 2020.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Chair and members of the Exiting the EU Committee for today’s statement and their excellent report. The Committee I chair, the Health and Social Care Committee, has been very concerned about what could happen, in the event of no deal, to the future supply of medicines and devices because of the challenges to the supply chain. Will the Chair of the Committee set out in what other areas he is seeing concerns about the lack of contingency planning being published so that we can scrutinise what is happening and prepare for the future?

Hilary Benn: Ministers have said to us that work is going on to prepare for the possibility of no deal. The Committee has previously expressed its view that a no deal outcome would be very damaging to the British economy and create a great deal of uncertainty. That is why we say in the report that we do not accept that a rejection of the deal will then automatically lead to us leaving with no deal, because it would be for Parliament, in the end, to decide whether it was prepared to leave the European Union with no deal. That would be a matter for every single one of us as Members.

I think the nearer we get to March 2019, the more there will be concern if the possibility of no deal being agreed becomes greater than it is at present. I still hope and believe that agreement will be reached because, frankly, neither side in this negotiation should contemplate with any equanimity the prospect of leaving with no deal. The consequences would be exceedingly serious, as we learned from the evidence we heard from the Port of Dover when we visited it, in terms of practical things like keeping the lorries flowing, never mind the medicines, never mind aircraft, never mind broadcasting rights, never mind data transfer. There is a very long list of questions on which people know how the system works today and they want to know how it will work once we have left, but they are very worried about what would happen if there were no deal, and my own personal view—I have expressed it in the House before—is that that is not something we should contemplate at all.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and thank him for his forbearance in what is sometimes a very robust discussion in Committee; he is certainly masterful in seeking consensus.

The question is really around the vote in October and the content of the political declaration on the framework for the future relationship. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a real risk of a wishy-washy, vague, motherhood-and-apple-pie political declaration in an attempt to keep the Conservative party together, rather than giving MPs a clear sense of the direction our future relationship would take? What steps does he think the Government should take to assure the House that there will be sufficient detail in that political declaration to make a meaningful vote truly meaningful?

Hilary Benn: I thank my hon. Friend. For his work on the Committee. I hope he will forgive me if I do not comment on party considerations in making this statement here today, but he raises an important issue about the nature of the political declaration. We heard clearly in evidence that it will not be a treaty or draft treaty, although there was some debate when we heard from Guy Verhofstadt about whether including it as an annexe to the agreement would give it greater force. It will come down to this question: will the House think there is sufficient certainty about the nature of our future relationship on all the things I mentioned a moment ago to the Chair of the Select Committee on Health, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), in the political declaration or not? If we approve it and there is not that certainty, the House will really be saying, “Well, let’s see what happens.”

There are two parts to this negotiation: the withdrawal agreement, which is the divorce settlement, and which is important, and our future relationship on trade, security, the fight against terrorism, foreign policy and services—80% of the British economy is services—which is the really important bit. Therefore, the more detail and the more certainty the political declaration can offer, and the more the parties to the negotiation can show they are committed to turning that into a treaty, the better it will be for Parliament as it makes its judgment.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his report and his very informative statement. He alluded in his comments to having some frustrations about the speed of negotiations, and attributed that not just to this side of the channel but also to the other side. Does he agree that it is time for Brussels to move aside the politics and to start thinking about the economic interests of its citizens, and to move forward in a more constructive fashion with the negotiations?
Hilary Benn: That is not directly covered in the report, but I will give the hon. Gentleman a personal view because he asks me the question. It is going to take two to reach an agreement, and I have already made the following point publicly as Chair of the Select Committee. The Government have their red lines, and in some respects they have already turned a slightly pinker shade, for example when the Prime Minister very sensibly said, “We want to continue to co-operate on security and recognise that that will involve the remit of the European Court of Justice,” and the same has been said in respect of the agencies. In my view, the EU negotiators should not then fold their arms and say, “That’s all very difficult”; they should say, “Fine, but you’re going to have to contribute financially and accept the rules, and you won’t have a vote although you might be in the room, and you’ll have to accept any judgments made by the ECJ.” Let us consider, for example, the European Aviation Safety Authority: it is patently sensible from everybody’s point of view that we should continue to be part of it, and I think there has been one ECJ judgment in the past three years on a very technical matter.

We hear a lot about cherry-picking, too. We looked carefully in our previous report at all the different deals the EU has negotiated—with Norway, the European economic area, Ukraine, Switzerland, Canada and so on—and it could be said that all of them involve elements of cherry-picking. One person’s cherry-picking is another person’s bespoke agreement. Speaking personally, I hope there is movement on both sides, because it seems to me that that is essential if we are going to get a sensible deal for British business and the British people.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the Select Committee Chair for his statement and all the work undertaken by the Committee members. I welcome the conclusion that the Government should also commit to seeking the views of the devolved Parliaments as part of the process of seeking approval for the withdrawal Act and political declaration. Has the Select Committee taken evidence or come to any view as to whether the Joint Ministerial Committee has been an effective consultation forum previously?

Hilary Benn: We have taken some evidence previously on that question, and clearly there is currently a difficulty in respect of the withdrawal Act between the UK Government and the Scottish Government about how the powers that will come back will be used and by whom, and I hope very much that that is resolved. One of our report’s recommendations states: “The Government should set out in detail the processes by which the views of the devolved governments and parliaments will be fed into the negotiations on the UK’s future relationship with the EU and on future trade agreements with non-EU states”, depending on where we end up in terms of trading arrangements.

The view has been expressed to us in the past that previously there were gaps between meetings of the Committee. It is my understanding that there have been more meetings more recently, but that does not necessarily result in a unanimity of view on what is the right thing to do. My advice, in so far as it is asked for, is “If you’ve got a difference of view, it is a jolly good idea to sit around the table and try and work it out.”

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his Committee on an excellent report. He mentions that there are only 21 months after the end of March next year for the so-called implementation and transition period; in fact, the report points out that there will be European Parliament elections and a new Commission and the real time for real negotiation in that period will be about 15 months. Is he confident that the Government are aware of this, and does he expect a response from the Government within two months, as is customary, to this House, so that we can look at these issues in detail before the autumn?

Hilary Benn: On my hon. Friend’s last point, the Committee does indeed hope and expect that it will receive a response from the Government in the allotted time. We have produced a number of reports, and I think there might be one report on which we are still awaiting a response, but, in fairness to Ministers, they have got a lot on. I see that the Minister smiles, and I am in my most generous mood today; they have indeed got a lot on. I am sure Ministers understand the dynamics of the change in the EU come next year, with the elections and the new Commission being formed, although to be absolutely fair, when we asked Guy Verhofstadt about this last week, as I recall, he expressed the view that he did not really think that would create a great difficulty, but we have heard different evidence from other people.

What I would say is that whether that causes the time to be truncated or not, 21 months to sort out the whole list of things that we are all aware of, and Ministers are more aware of than anybody else, is not very long bearing in mind that the other bit of the process is ratification at the end of it. To the extent that an agreement reached becomes a mixed agreement, the ratification process—unlike the withdrawal agreement, for which the process is the Council by qualified majority voting, this Parliament, the European Parliament—would involve the Parliaments of all of the member states, including regional Parliaments, and we all recall what the Parliament of Wallonia did for about three weeks in respect of the Canada trade deal. So that adds to the uncertainty and to the pressure to try to get these negotiations concluded as quickly as possible.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that suggestions of an extension of any transition period are likely to be welcomed by many sectors of our economy? In the past few weeks, businesses have lined up to express their concern about the time available to provide business continuity and to safeguard jobs.

Hilary Benn: I suspect that that is the case. Why did the Government eventually seek a transitional period? They did so because we all agreed that falling off the edge of a cliff in March next year without an agreement was not sensible for the economy. Picking up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) raised a moment ago, if we have not been able to conclude all the details of a treaty or treaties on the future partnership during the transitional period, what would be the logic of then falling off a cliff 21 months later? There is none. My own view is that it is increasingly likely that there will have to be a further transition period, because we are running out of time.
Let us take as an example the customs arrangements that the Cabinet is currently discussing. I think it is pretty clear that even if it reached agreement on one or other of them, there might not be time to get all of that implemented before the end of December 2020. The indications that I have seen suggest that that might not be possible. If it is not possible, or if it is not possible to reach an agreement, it clearly makes sense to extend the transition period. For that to happen, however, there has to be a clause in the withdrawal agreement to allow for such an extension. The last thing we want is to end up, in December 2020, with everyone agreeing that it would be sensible to have a bit more time, only for someone to say, “I’m really sorry, but this agreement doesn’t allow for that, so you’re out on your ear with whatever you’re holding at the time.” And that is not in the interests of the United Kingdom, is it?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Paragraph 19, and the right hon. Gentleman himself, has referred to the need for procedures to consult the devolved Governments on free trade deals with Europe, and indeed with non-EU countries. He has referred to the current little disagreement between Governments and Parliaments. In view of the importance of this for devolved areas and for premium Scottish products and businesses, does he think that the devolved Governments should have a place at the table when trade deals are being negotiated?

Hilary Benn: I grappled with this question when I was Environment Secretary. I would talk to my opposite number, Richard Lochhead, and he would sometimes come to Brussels and we would discuss the matter in question beforehand. However, the position always was, and remains to this day, that it is the United Kingdom as one country that is negotiating. Of course, in doing that, the United Kingdom should take account of the interests and needs of businesses in different sectors and different parts of the country, and of the particular products that the hon. Lady has referred to. As far as the current difficulty is concerned, as I observed when we had a statement from the Secretary of State for Scotland recently, there is agreement on both sides that there are 24 areas on which the two sides need to sit down and talk. I hope that that process can unfold soon and reach agreement, because if agreement can be reached on the 24 areas, there should not be a difference of principle, because this has been done by means of negotiation.
of this country, and that they have the right to disregard a motion of this House and to decide if and when they should give evidence to a Select Committee of the House and on what terms. That is unacceptable. For most people in this country, it would never get to that stage because they accept an invitation to appear before a Select Committee, and even if there are sometimes disputes about the date or the time involved, they decide to come. Anyone who holds a position of public trust—be they the holder of a public post in government or a public authority, or the leader of a company who is accountable to shareholders, investors or a broader group of stakeholders—can see that responding to a request from Parliament to explain their actions or those of their organisation is part and parcel of their job. That convention has been established, and it is increasingly important to the work of the Select Committees, whose job is not simply to hold Government Ministers to account but to pursue inquiries that are of public interest.

Our inquiry into disinformation and fake news threw up some important and serious issues that we wanted to talk to Dominic Cummings about. In some ways, however, this is not about our inquiry or the work of our individual Committee; it is about the right of Parliament to issue requests for people to give evidence to its Committees and for those requests to be complied with. The Committee of Privileges will now consider not only the conduct of Dominic Cummings and the way in which he declined our request but also the general contempt with which he treated the Committee in correspondence when he was engaging with us.

What should the rights of the House be when someone refuses to respond to a motion of the House regarding their giving evidence to a Committee? What sanctions should be applied? I believe that there has to be a final sanction—a final backstop. It is probably not for elected politicians in the House of Commons to be issuing fines and summonses or setting penalties or punishments for non-compliance, but there has to be a next step. There has to be some kind of sanction for someone who has been blatant in their behaviour and their language and in the contempt that they have shown for Parliament. This serious matter has now been referred to the Committee of Privileges, and this is bigger than just considering the response to Dominic Cummings; it now involves a wider consideration of the powers of the House when we are put in a situation such as this.

1.9 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it not supremely telling that someone who based the whole of their Brexit campaign on the sovereignty of this place has treated it with such contempt? As the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) says, there must be proper sanctions when dealing with contempt of this seriousness.

1.9 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): We had a very good discussion about this issue at the Liaison Committee; I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) about the supreme irony: that the mastermind of the leave campaign, whose sole raison d’être was all about parliamentary sovereignty and taking back control, should be turning his back on this place in a show of arrogance and contempt that cannot go unmarked or unpunished.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that the Order of the House of Thursday 7 June has not been complied with; and accordingly refers the matter to the Committee of Privileges.
Backbench Business

Improving Air Quality


Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I suggest that we work on the basis of 15 minutes for opening speeches and 10 minutes for speeches thereafter.

1.10 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,


I very much back speakers on the previous motion in their points about contempt of Parliament when people refuse to give evidence to Select Committees.

I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the Liaison Committee and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time in this House to debate our report on improving air quality. I thank my fellow Chairs and members of the Health, Transport and Environmental Audit Committees for all their work and help; I also thank the many staff across all the Committees for helping put together the four-Committee report, which is a challenging task.

Last October, we launched a joint inquiry to consider the Government’s most recent plans for reducing levels of nitrogen dioxide. The cross-cutting inquiry examined whether the Government’s plans to cut air quality pollution were adequate. We have concluded that they are not. The UK has failed to meet our legal air quality limits since 2010, and successive Governments have failed to get a grip and improve our air quality. Air pollution is a silent killer. It is the largest environmental risk to public health, costing the UK an estimated £20 billion every year in health impacts. Air pollution affects everyone, from those driving their cars to those who walk or cycle to work—especially in the many hotspots in our inner cities.

I am not saying that the Government have failed to take any action. It is good to see that they have taken on board key recommendations in our joint report, including: consolidating the patchwork of air quality legislation; developing a personal air pollution alert system for the public; making better use of air quality data from local authorities; and making sure that those data are compatible with each other. I also very much welcome the commitments in the latest clean air strategy consultation to cut levels of particulate pollution.

Although those initial steps are welcome, they are not nearly enough. Real change requires bold, meaningful actions, which are absent from the Government’s current approach. In our report, we called for a properly resourced national support scheme to help councils struggling with air pollution. Such a scheme would require far greater cross-departmental working and joint planning—something that, as we highlighted, is severely lacking right now. In addition, we recommended a ‘polluter pays’ clean air fund.

This is not a war on motorists. We envisioned that the fund would be paid for by the automobile industry. I do not want to punish those who bought diesel vehicles that had been recommended by previous Governments; they bought in good faith and will need time and support to rectify the mistakes and recommendations of those previous Governments. I urge the Government to re-examine their decision not to have a targeted diesel scrappage scheme.

Furthermore, we need significant efforts to speed up the roll-out of electric charging infrastructure, which must include more rapid charging points to accelerate the transition to low-emission vehicles across all our towns and cities. It is essential that people should be able not only to charge up their cars, but to do so quickly, otherwise we will not get enough people into electric cars. All that requires a new clean air Act to update and streamline existing legislation. The new legislation could also include measures to ensure that the Government are held to account on environmental issues once we have left the EU. A new clean air Act is absolutely essential, and I ask the Minister today to confirm the timescale for the introduction of such an Act.

I find it disappointing that the Government are not making the automobile industry pay for the damage it has caused. We have already been let down in this regard: when we did not get anywhere near enough compensation out of Volkswagen for the emissions scandal. I am amazed that the German Government were able to get €1 billion, while all we seem to have got are the zeros. The automobile industry has a yearly turnover of some £80 billion.

In recent tests, the majority of the latest 2017 diesel cars are almost four times above the EU’s baseline emissions limit.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I come back to my hon. Friend’s point about Volkswagen and Germany. Would it not be ironic and extremely unfortunate if the German car industry used that €1 billion to leapfrog into clean new-energy vehicles that put them at a competitive advantage, given that there has been no similar payment that could help the UK motor industry?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. I am amazed: do British lawyers lack teeth? Do Government lawyers lack any sort of drive and ambition? It is not just Volkswagen; others out there could also contribute. If we got funds from them, those could help towards producing cleaner vehicles or helping with air quality in our inner cities and hotspots across the country. It seems so ridiculous to lose that form of money and funding.
Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not find it extraordinary that the US Department of Justice and the state of California have brought a case against Volkswagen, which has had to pay out more than $4 billion in the United States, with six people having been indicted, yet the UK Government are being brought to the European Court of Justice for our complete inertia in tackling this criminality?

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady, a fellow Select Committee Chair, raises a very good point. What I cannot understand is that although the money is not exactly free, it is money we could get from a source separate from British taxpayers, or wherever, to help to clean up a situation created by these vehicles. I urge the Minister today to come forward with ideas about how we can get some money from the car industry, especially Volkswagen; as the hon. Lady says, the Americans seem to be somewhat more effective at that job than we are.

The “polluter pays” fund would mean that the Government could have more money available to improve public transport and speed up the roll-out of infrastructure needed for low-emission vehicles. The emissions scandal showed us that all the manufacturers were prepared to put profit above everything else, including our health, but the Government are shying away from making them pay.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that such a fund could also be used to build infrastructure for those who walk or cycle—for active transport?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Health and Social Care Committee, makes a good point. Once we have the money, there are limitless things we can do with it. The unfortunate fact is that we do not have the money at the moment. I think the Government have felt that. Walking, cycling and altering the way we go about our daily lives is all good. It is good for our health, and it gets us out of our cars.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that money would be well spent because, if we succeed in getting more people on to their bicycles or walking, it will deliver long-term savings both to physical healthcare and mental healthcare and create better communities?

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady, who chairs the Transport Committee, is absolutely right that the money would be well spent. Our health would be improved, and therefore we would save money on the NHS and we would be able to spend the money in other ways.

Why are there private individuals in this country who are prepared to bring a case against VW, yet we, as a Government, have singly failed? I would be interested if the Minister could give us some insight into why we allow private people, quite rightly, to bring a case, yet the Government are not supporting them and are not bringing a case themselves.

There is not a satisfactory system for overseeing how money is spent to improve our air quality. Our report finds that Departments are clearly failing to work together. The Government have promised some modest improvements, and I am sure the House looks forward to an update on that in the very near future, perhaps even today.

The Government response tells us that a consistent approach was taken to appraising the cost of air pollution, yet during our joint Committee hearings I was deeply concerned to learn that the then Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), was not even aware of how much economic impact air pollution has on the UK.

It is clear that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care and local authorities not only need to collaborate more effectively but need to collaborate, full stop.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does that not bring us to probably the single most important point we will touch on this afternoon, which is the need for health and wellbeing to be included in all policies and the need for us to get out of all the different silos?

Neil Parish: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Not only on air quality but in food policy and agriculture policy, health needs to be considered; it needs to be considered in all these things. This can be a beacon for the way forward, but we need much more co-operation between all parts of Government and local government. We would all agree that we have to be careful that the Government do not blame local government and that local government does not blame the Government.

The Government have told us that the Green Book guidance sets out what Departments should be doing and how they should be working together, but that has clearly not worked in the past, and we have received nothing to give us confidence that it will necessarily improve. Perhaps the Minister will be able to put me right.

The clean air strategy failed to include measures to improve road transport emissions. Emissions are being dealt with in a separate strategy, which demonstrates that the Government still operate in silos. I had hoped the Government would take more substantive measures to improve cross-departmental working.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points about the public purse and joined-up thinking between Departments. He says that road emissions are not included in the clean air strategy. Does he have any comment on aviation? Does he agree with some of us on this side that it seems lamentable that, when 9,000 Londoners a year are dying from toxic air, we have just taken a decision to approve the expansion of Heathrow airport? Willie Walsh, from the parent company of British Airways, said the decision is outrageous—he actually called it BS, but I will not repeat that word here because it is unparliamentary. He said that the cost does not stack up.

Neil Parish: I understand the hon. Lady’s concern, but I will not venture into the airport air pollution problem. A lot of the air quality, certainly on the
ground, has a lot to do with the extra traffic going in and out of the terminals. That also has to be dealt with. There is a lot to be done, but I do not want to get into a huge debate about the runway at Heathrow.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Parish: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, whom I consider to be my hon. Friend.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I commend the hon. Gentleman for being wise in not going down the route of debating Heathrow again. More Opposition Members supported the Heathrow national policy statement on Monday than opposed it.


It is disappointing that these matters have not been addressed properly, but I look forward to the Minister’s reply. It is also disappointing that the Government are not doing enough to support local authorities that are struggling with air quality. Local authorities face real funding restrictions. Although we said that councils need to “take ownership of delivering local solutions to local problems”, there is the question of whether it is possible to reduce air pollution significantly across the country without our national Government looking at the big picture. The existing mechanisms are not delivering the results we need.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to improving the amount of information and best practice sharing available to local authorities, but the change that is so necessary for struggling local authorities will not be achieved without substantial funding increases. That funding needs to be ring-fenced.

The High Court ruled against the 2017 NOx plan because it was too narrow. Since then, DEFRA has instructed an additional 33 local authorities to address NOx breaches. So far, only £1.65 million has been allocated to support those local authorities. I am sure the House will agree that that is clearly woefully inadequate, Mr Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.] Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. You changed very quickly.

We would like to see a properly resourced national support scheme for local authorities. The Government have said they might consider the additional funding requirements. I urge the Minister to make a clear statement of intent.

I am pleased to have had this opportunity to raise these issues, and I hope the House will give the Minister the oomph he needs to go away and ensure that the respective Departments heed our Committees’ joint work. The Government must grab the bull by the horns, make firm in their clean air strategy proposal and introduce a clean air Act.

1.27 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and I look forward to the speeches by my fellow Select Committee Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

I am afraid that this is a rather sorry tale of inaction and buck passing. Fault lies not with one party but with successive Governments. The efforts so far have been inadequate and have been characterised by a lack of urgency. We know the problems that poor air quality causes. It affects our health and our environment and, as has already been said, as many as 40,000 people die prematurely each year as a result of poor air quality. The elderly, the unwell and the economically deprived are those most likely to be affected. The Government estimate that poor air quality costs the UK economy £27.5 billion a year.

We also know where the problem occurs. Key pollutants include nitrogen dioxide and fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5. More than 85% of air quality zones in the UK—37 out of 43—exceeded EU nitrogen dioxide limits in 2016. They should have been compliant in 2010, and the Government think it will be 2026 before all 43 zones in the UK are compliant. The World Health Organisation tells us there is no safe level of exposure to fine particulate matter.

We know what causes poor air quality. It comes from several sources: industry, agriculture, homes, businesses and transport. Progress has been made, but it is stalling, and we are in breach of our legal obligations. Road transport is responsible for about 80% of nitrogen oxide concentrations at places in the UK that exceed legal limits, with diesel engines a significant contributor. The number of cars and vans on our roads continues to rise, and congestion has worsened, which increases pollution in itself. Although diesel cars have become less popular since the VW scandal was uncovered in 2015, for more than a decade before that the trend was in the opposite direction.

Transport also generates a significant proportion of particulate matter, from both combustion, and wear on tyres and brake pads. The Government have largely relied on cleaner vehicles to solve the problem, and limits on emissions, which are gradually tightened with each iteration of the euro standards, have helped us make some progress but not enough. Real world emissions have not fallen as promised, and renewing the fleet could take 15 years or more. Policies to accelerate this process, such as scrappage schemes, may be needed. The science, historical evidence and impact are clear, but we still have not taken the action that is needed. Three times the Government’s strategy has been found wanting by the courts, and the UK faces large fines by the EU Commission, along with other countries, for not bringing air quality within legal limits. We know the solutions that are needed, so it is shocking that successive Governments have failed to take the necessary action.

Nationally and locally there are examples of good things happening. In my own city there has been considerable investment in public transport, with major extensions to our tram network, and that was supported by the coalition Government. Last year, Nottingham’s municipal bus company introduced new biogas buses, and work has begun to retrofit its entire fleet of diesel buses by autumn 2019. Last week, on Clean Air Day, the city council launched an anti-idling campaign, mirroring similar action in other towns and cities across the UK. As I have said, the Department for Transport has
supported the development of low emission buses and taxis, has regulated maritime emissions, is supporting low emission vehicles and alternative fuels, and has lead work on the development of real driving emissions standards.

So what has gone wrong—why have we not solved this problem? The first issue we found in this regard was collaboration. That is not a problem that can be fixed by central Government or local government alone—they need to work together. At present, action is too fragmented, lacks clear leadership, and is not properly costed or resourced. There are no fiscal measures that support long-term behaviour change in a meaningful way. Local authorities are already responsible for meeting air quality limits but find it difficult to make changes, partly due to lack of resources, but partly because the changes needed are politically unpalatable. Our joint Select Committee report called for ambitious, co-ordinated, cross-departmental action. Sadly, the Government’s new draft strategy says almost nothing about emissions from cars, and we are still waiting for the Department to publish its strategy “Road to Zero”. That simply does not seem very joined-up.

It is vital that we encourage the uptake of clean technologies and remove the most polluting vehicles from our roads, but the Government rejected a more ambitious target for ending the sale of petrol and diesel cars before 2040. Today, Lord Deben, chair of the Committee on Climate Change, echoed our call in the drive to meet targets on carbon emissions. There are rumours that the “Road to Zero” will water down the commitment to end sales of diesel and petrol cars even further, and I hope that this latest intervention will prompt Ministers to think again.

The Government also need to accelerate the switch to ultra low emission vehicles, and that requires a network of charging points, particularly for rapid charging, and a strategy for on-street residential charging.

Dr Huq: Does my hon. Friend agree that in London we have made significant progress, with the current Mayor bringing forward the ultra low emission zone and with the proposed toxicity charge? However, sadly, a lot of this seems to have been undermined by this week’s decision—I know she voted the right way—to have an extra runway in Heathrow. People in west London are lamenting that, and I regret that a lot of the good work in her report was ignored by the Government’s national policy statement.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend. She rightly says that a lot of work has been done in London, yet it still faces a huge challenge on air quality. That is one reason why our Select Committee report on the airports NPS calls for extra safeguards on air quality. Obviously, Parliament did vote for the NPS and the Secretary of State has now designated it, but it is essential he keeps his promises on air quality.

It is also vital that the public sector leads, demonstrating what is possible. The Government could set dates by which their car fleet will all be ULEV’s. Local authorities, the NHS and other large public bodies could do the same with their fleets. It is not just on road transport where the Government are less ambitious than they might be. The decision to row back from electrification of our railways in favour of bi-mode trains has worrying implications for air quality, carbon emissions and noise. Of course, our Committee has also published a report on rail investment today. Those look more like decisions taken in isolation than decisions taken under the umbrella of an overarching strategy.

There is a danger that the Government rely too heavily on new technologies to solve our air quality challenges, placing too much emphasis on cleaning up road vehicles and not enough on reducing the number of vehicles on our roads. Improving public transport and encouraging active travel should lie at the heart of any clean air strategy. Our four committees concluded that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Transport must work closely with local authorities to ensure that councils introducing clean air zones receive the support they need to implement complementary measures that encourage car drivers to switch to public transport and active travel, as well as increasing the take-up of electric vehicles. Yet modal shift and active travel—walking and cycling—hardly get a mention in the Government’s draft strategy.

Investment in low emission buses is great but the value of such investments is magnified if local authorities also take steps to encourage motorists to opt for buses rather than making journeys by car. The latest passenger statistics show that bus patronage is falling and rail passenger numbers are also down. It is too early to say whether that is a blip or the start of a trend, but the Government should be concerned. Is the policy response in line with the strategy the Government tell us they want to have? Well, not really—the cost of rail and bus travel are rising faster than the cost of motoring. The Government’s own assumptions appear to show that, as things stand, they accept that their policies will not deliver a financial incentive to encourage or support modal shift. Without some action, whether on fuel duty or charging zones, efforts to tackle congestion or improve air quality are less likely to succeed. It would be helpful if the Government were to articulate more clearly than they have what they want to achieve on modal shift and how they will deliver that, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments today.

The Government also need to create a framework in which local authorities have the resources and powers they need to act. The new expectations on councils on air quality come at a time when they are already facing huge funding pressures. The Government must provide all local authorities breaching nitrogen dioxide limit levels with access to the financial resources they need to tackle them. Responsibility for providing those resources should not lie only with the public sector: following the principle that the polluter should pay, the private sector should be asked to contribute to a clean air fund. As hon. Members have said, Volkswagen and other car manufacturers that cheated emissions tests should be held to account. Our Select Committee has repeatedly raised this issue with Ministers and the lack of action is deeply disappointing.

Policies and action at local level also need supporting national policies and a public debate that makes it less difficult to implement things that may not be universally popular. Our ambition on clean air is linked more with the associated public health and environmental benefits, cannot succeed without action by local authorities, businesses and communities. The sustained improvements we have seen...
in air quality in the past can be continued only if Government action—legislative, policy, taxation, and spending—is co-ordinated and working in tandem with other players. By failing to act in a joined-up way, the Government are not just undermining their air quality strategy; they are missing opportunities for synergies that would help deliver on other policy goals. For example, many of the policies needed to tackle urban congestion could also help to improve air quality, and tackling both could have a positive effect on the local and national economy. A significant increase in active travel could make a difference to policies on tackling obesity, improving mental health and building better communities. Action on air quality could help to reduce carbon emissions. The realisation of the wider benefits cannot be left to happen by chance.

Action on poor air quality is long overdue. There are things we can do—this is not a problem without a solution—but if the Government do not show leadership, nothing will change. We have passed the point where more of the same will do the job; the courts have made that clear. Bold, ambitious and innovative policies are needed to create the right framework for action—a framework within which national policies support and encourage the right kinds of action at a local level. The Government have launched a consultation on their clean air strategy, but its lack of focus on transport emissions looks complacent, falling well short of what we recommended in our joint report. I hope that Ministers will heed our calls today and redouble their efforts.

1.40 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): During the inquiry, we learned from Professor Holgate, the lead clinician from the Royal College of Physicians, that poor air quality is the second biggest cause of avoidable mortality in this country, after smoking. It cuts short some 40,000 lives a year, and we know from the British Heart Foundation and others that even a day’s exposure to elevated levels of poor-quality air can increase the likelihood of a heart attack.

Were any of us to go into our local GP surgery, we would very likely see in the leaflet stands or on the walls information on helping us to reduce our alcohol consumption or to cut back smoking or give up altogether, and hopefully we would see some information on coming off illegal substances. All are public health risks that are well known and well understood, and information on them has reached the level of our local surgeries. I challenge any Member present to go into their local GP surgery and see what they can find about what to do about poor air quality, the second biggest cause of avoidable mortality in our country. We need to do more. GPs are under pressure and there is an awful lot that they need to do. We need education in the medical schools, we need the royal colleges to get on top of the issue, and we need Public Health England to take a lead in this policy area. I shall say more about the latter shortly.

I occasionally feel that the issue of poor air quality is set up as a battle between the air-quality zealots on one side and on the other those who champion lower-income motorists and people struggling to get around in their ordinary lives. That is a completely false way to look at the issue. Let us consider for a moment a woman who has to drive a van—probably a diesel van—for her living. She is often stuck in traffic but it is the only way that she can earn her living to put bread on the table for the children. It is possible that she lives near a busy road and her children go to a school that is also near a busy road. That lady needs to earn her living. She needs that van—it is probably the only van that she can get hold of to do her work—but at the same time her health is being damaged. So it is not about the people who are concerned about this issue on one side and on the other people who just see it as a bore from well-meaning busybodies who want to interfere and make their lives more difficult. It is a more nuanced and complicated issue than that. We have to help people to live their lives in an affordable manner so that they can earn their incomes without suffering huge damage to their health. I direct the House’s attention to what the California Air Resources Board did with a targeted scheme to help people on lower incomes to move to cleaner and less polluting vehicles.

If one thing comes out of my speech today, for the House and anybody who may be listening to it outside this place, I want it to be the fact, which is almost unknown and unrecognised by the public, that people in their car are up to 10 times worse off in terms of the damage being done to their health than they are outside on the street. It is the complete opposite of what most of our constituents believe. They believe that if they are in their car with the air conditioning on, they are relatively protected from all the horrible fumes outside.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I thank my political neighbour for giving way. I suffered from breathing fumes in traffic jams when driving my car on holiday. I did not know that my chest problems were to do with breathing fumes. The simple technique of making sure that when we use our air conditioning, we press the button that recirculates the air inside the car rather than drawing in polluted air from outside, is very important. It would be helpful if that information was given to people.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my parliamentary neighbour for giving us that personal example of how he was affected.

I am afraid that the bad news does not stop there. Professor Holgate also told us that even in buses and taxis, for which researchers have done similar measurements, people are two to three times worse off than if they were walking on the street. Of course, we absolutely need to encourage more bus travel, hopefully in clean buses—perhaps electric or hydrogen-powered—but we have to look at how we travel around our big cities, particularly as we arrive in major towns, the traffic slows down and we all get stuck in it. If people knew the facts and were aware, there would be a demand: when people stood for the local council or for Parliament, they would be asked, “What are you going to do to help to make this issue better in my local area when you get on to the council?”, or “What is Parliament going to do about it?”

Mary Creagh: I passionately agree with the excellent points that the hon. Gentleman is making, but does he agree that we need fundamentally to rethink how we think of traffic? When people say that they are stuck in
traffic, they are traffic—they are part of the congestion. When I cycle to work in the mornings, I am not stuck in traffic because I am part of a cycling stream that is going around the people who are stuck in their vehicles. If we want cities where people can move and breathe, we need fundamentally to rethink what traffic looks like.

Andrew Selous: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. In another guise, I co-chair the all-party group on cycling, so I absolutely get the importance of cycling and walking. They are not just good for our health and do not just cut congestion and pollution, but are good for our mental health, helping us to socialise and build community. There are so many reasons why what the hon. Lady said is absolutely right.

Dr Whitford: My home is on the west coast of Scotland, where I am lucky to have incredibly clean air, but when I am down here I normally walk or cycle to Parliament. If anyone else present suffers from asthma, they will know what a bad winter I have had, almost continuously since last November. It is no good telling people to get on their bikes or to walk when that then exposes them. We need to deal with the traffic to allow safe cycling.

Andrew Selous: I could not agree more. As someone who over the Easter recess cycled from my home to my constituency office along the busy A5, with juggernauts going fairly close to me, I completely understand what the hon. Lady says. We need safe cycling, and all the evidence shows that more people will cycle if it is safer. That is especially true for children going to school from all the new housing developments. When we build new housing, it is essential that we have safe cycle routes to the schools. That will result in healthier children, less childhood obesity and better communities.

Let me go quickly through the full list of health problems associated with poor air quality. It includes: premature birth; reduction in foetal growth; low birth weight; increased risk of death during the first year of life, particularly from respiratory illnesses; exacerbation of the effects of respiratory infections in young children; and effects on the normal growth of lung function during childhood. There is really shocking evidence that if a child’s lung capacity is damaged when it is young, it may never recover. From a social justice point of view, it is even worse, because it is the poorest kids who are breathing in the worst air. That is why this issue matters so much.

The list also includes cardiovascular disease, heart attacks, hypertension and stroke. Poor air quality also leads to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; pneumonia; accelerated decline in lung function and lung cancer in adulthood; the development of early onset asthma, which the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned just now, as well as exacerbating asthma in those already living with the condition; impaired cognition; dementia—a big Canadian study showed a link with dementia; and other neuro-degenerative disorders as well as type 2 diabetes, obesity and metabolic syndrome. I think that we can say that that is a pretty concerning list.

Public Health England is a very fine body, which I admire very greatly. Its chief executive, Duncan Selbie, does very good work, but we need more action from the organisation. It needs to be engaged in this issue. What it has done so far has been quite high level and quite strategic; it has not really come down to the level of the citizen, which is where we need it to be active.

One recommendation of the joint report of the Select Committees was that Public Health England should deliver an effective and appropriate campaign by this September, but Public Health England has told us that that is not possible in the timescale. That is despite the fact that the World Health Organisation has called this issue a public health emergency. I ask PHE to re-double its efforts on this issue and really try to get this information down to local levels so that people are, first, informed and, secondly, know what they can do to protect themselves best, and to stop being part of the problem and to start contributing to the issue.

I was pleased to see in the foreword to the Government’s 2018 clean air strategy, the statement by the Secretary of State that there would be a new goal that takes into account the World Health Organisation guidelines. There was also a commitment to primary legislation. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), cares a lot about these matters. When he responds, could he please give us a little bit more detail on this issue? There are specific World Health Organisation guidelines on the amount of particulate matter—PM_{2.5}—that we should not exceed on a daily basis. When the Government talk about taking into account the guidelines, I hope that they will go into that level of detail, bearing in mind what I said about the briefing from the British Heart Foundation about the increased risk of heart attack from elevated exposure to poor air quality just within a 24-hour period.

Winter pressure in the national health service is a huge issue that concerns every single Member here and I know the national health service is taking it extremely seriously as we head towards next winter. I have just been in the Upper Waiting Hall speaking to Dr Hugh Coe from Manchester University as part of evidence week, which is a very welcome intervention, as the top academics and scientists who know about these issues take the time and trouble to come down to Parliament to brief Members so that we are properly informed and can make good decisions on these matters. Dr Hugh Coe confirmed what the clinical chair of Bedfordshire clinical commissioning group said to me quite recently, which was that part of the increase in winter pressures, much of which is caused by older people going into hospital with respiratory problems, is from poor air quality. When we have cold weather in winter, the air is clammy and a bit foggy, which means that the pollution gets stuck in it. We breathe it in. It affects us more as we breathe it in. The same happens when it is very hot in the summer because the sun exacerbates the pollution. Again, I do not think that it is well known that there is this link between poor air quality, higher levels of respiratory problems and the winter pressures that we are all concerned about—a further reason for action.

My final issue is how we energise this issue at a local level. The Government talk about monitoring levels of air quality around schools. I would add old people’s homes as well. There are many other communities that are very important that we know the level of air quality. That information is really important to inform local residents, so that when they are looking to elect people...
to public office, either to Parliament or to local authorities, they can let them know how seriously they take this issue and the fact that they want something to be done about it.

Finally, we had a meeting on air quality and active travel in my constituency not so long ago. An older lady who had never smoked and who had led a pretty healthy life came up to me and said, “I am here today. I have just been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Where did that come from?” She had never smoked. The chances were, I am afraid, that she got it from breathing in poor quality air. That will greatly affect the last years of her life. Sometimes we talk in statistics and percentages, but I want to end my contribution with that one lady and the impact on her remaining years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a gentle reminder that if we stick to 10 minutes each, I will not have to impose a time limit. There is another debate to follow this one.

1.56 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will endeavour to stick to the time limit.

I join my colleagues in thanking the Liaison and Backbench Business Committees for granting us this debate. As we have heard, air pollution causes an estimated 40,000 early deaths each year. That is as much as is caused by alcohol. As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said in his speech—and it is a pleasure to follow him—we go to our GP surgery and we find out about obesity and tackling drug and alcohol problems, but there is no advice on air pollution, despite successive reports from different Committees. The Environmental Audit Committee, the predecessor Committee, looked at this issue back in 2011 and it was seen as almost a cranky thing to be considering—a bit weird, a bit strange and a bit eco-warriorish. The fact that we are now debating this on the Floor of the House shows the long period of education—both of the public and of parliamentarians—that has taken place in the seven years since then. We are now waking up to a public health emergency.

One hundred and seventy eight of those early deaths were in Wakefield. I urge Members to go up to the Upper Waiting Hall and look at the quality of the air in their constituencies. We are in the middle of a hot spell. It has not, as yet, been defined as a heatwave. People might think that it is a heatwave, but we have had the Met Office in. We are looking at heatwaves at the moment, so everything that the Environmental Audit Committee looks at suddenly becomes a big, interesting thing. The link between heatwaves and air pollution is very strong. One early piece of evidence that we have seen is that we will experience more excess deaths in future as our country and our planet warm, so this is something that we need to start thinking about.

We have heard about how the Government have failed successively in various air pollution plans to get this right. We should have met our targets back in 2010, and we have millions of people now living with illegally high levels of air pollution, and we are back into the realms of plan A, plan B and plan C. It is a bit like Samuel Beckett said, “Fail again. Fail better.” The only reason why the Government are acting is because of European Union law, and now we are set to leave the EU. The Government are only accepting a post-Brexit watchdog because Parliament has demanded it. Again, that is something that my Committee is looking at. It is of absolutely prime importance that we have not just the air quality standards, but some enforcement mechanism after we leave.

Our Committees asked the National Audit Office—my Committee likes to audit things and we like to see the measurement, the numbers, the costs and the benefits—to investigate performance on air pollution. It found that 85% of air quality zones did not meet the EU’s nitrogen dioxide limits in 2016, and those zones are forecast to be in breach for another eight years—till 2026.

We talk a lot about transport. Transport is responsible for the concentration of nitrogen dioxide, but the NAO discovered in its forensic work that wood-burning stoves are responsible for 42% of all emissions across the country, and that agriculture is responsible for 80% of ammonia emissions. We must not focus only on urban transport; that is where the concentrations are, but we must also look at wood-burning stoves. I was very disappointed to hear the comments of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about banning “wood-burning Goves”—wood-burning stoves. We cannot afford to joke about this issue. We can act in a regulatory manner; it is possible to have low-emission stoves. We have to act in order to ensure that people are not buying something for their home that is going to sit there, belching out this stuff in the winter for the next 20 years. The cost of the health impacts of air pollution is £20 billion a year, which puts into context the costs of acting on this issue. The Government have until October to try again.

The main victims of air pollution are drivers and passengers. I went on Radio 5 Live to say this, and there was slight annoyance from some of the people who were phoning in. They were asking, “Why has no one told us to shut our air vents when we are sitting in our vehicles?” Professor Stephen Holgate told our inquiry how the placement of exhausts and ventilation systems means that “you just vent the freshest, most toxic pollutants—the fumes coming right out of the tailpipe—straight into the car, to your child sitting in the back seat.”

For those of us who have pushed babies in buggies to school, they are also at tailpipe level. That means that the youngest, most vulnerable members of our communities—the ones with smaller lungs—are the ones breathing in the most of this stuff. As a community, we really need to think about this.

We have been looking at what happens with air quality targets if we leave the EU. Domestic legislation is not as strong and not taken as seriously as EU law, because EU law has the threat of fines behind it. The four Committees welcomed proposals to bring forward an environmental watchdog, but we said that it must have the powers “to force the Government to act, otherwise action on air quality will be further weakened.” The Government brought forward their proposals, but mentioned an advisory notice, which is effectively a watchdog with no teeth. Parliament has now stepped in.
The European Union (Withdrawal) Act requires the Government to bring forward a Bill in the next six months to create a body with enforcement powers. Next month, my Committee will publish a report recommending what that body should look like.

We have come a long way, even since our inquiry earlier this year. Back then, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), told us that no legislation was necessary. But we recommended that the right to clean air be put into law. I am glad that the Government now accept the need for legislation as part of a clean air strategy to meet our EU obligations.

We also need to ensure that we are looking at how we can phase out petrol and diesel cars, and we need the Government to be joined up on this issue. During our inquiry, we sat there with four Ministers in front of us, and it was a bit like a children’s party game—pass the parcel. The Department for Communities and Local Government passed it on to the Department for Transport, which passed it on to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—the DEFRA Minister was the star of the show—and the Department of Health. The issue was being passed around. The people responsible for designing the cities were not talking to the people designing the transportation system, who were not talking to the people responsible for air quality, who were not talking to the public health people. This is not acceptable. We cannot allow air pollution to keep falling through the policy cracks and gaps in this way.

We now hear that the Government’s plans to phase out petrol and diesel cars are being downgraded to a “mission”. Well, saints protect us from Governments on a mission. Norway is going to phase out the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2025. India, the Netherlands, Germany and Scotland all plan to do so earlier than the UK. We are missing a trick here. If we are not in the vanguard when it comes to acting on this issue, we are going to lose the global environmental race. The fourth industrial revolution has already started. It is taking place at technological speed—at the speed of the tech revolution. Things are going to start speeding up very quickly.

Buses are the Cinderella in all this. Only one quarter of buses in west Yorkshire meet the Euro 5 standard. I am sure that it is very similar in south Yorkshire, Madam Deputy Speaker. When we audited the Ministry of Justice—a big Department with lots of prisons, probation, courts and estate to look after—we found that it had just three electric vehicles, even though it is responsible for a quarter of Government spend on goods and services. Greening Government commitments mean nothing if the Government are not acting as well. Why does the NHS not have an electric car fleet? We spend £110 billion or £120 billion of public money on the health service every year, yet we are allowing our nurses and doctors out in the community to drive polluting vehicles. It is just not on. We have to lead by example.

Will the Minister tell us when he is going to bring forward the commitments to label cars more clearly? People buy cars every day of the week, but they are buying a pig in a poke. They might be looking at the taxation side of their purchase, but they do not know about the emissions side. It costs nothing to introduce those labelling standards. When can we expect to see them?

Finally, we have heard a lot about electric vehicles and low-emission vehicles. I travel to work in this place every day on an ultra-low emission vehicle. It is called a bicycle. It emits no carbon apart from my breath, which is sometimes a little heavier and laboured when it is a bit hot. Every day, I cycle past the measurement on the embankment, which reads, for example, “6,000 cyclists today” or “10,000 cyclists today”. It was perhaps a bit lower when we had the “beast from the east”, although I still cycled in through the snow—very, very slowly. Blackfriars bridge now carries more cyclists than cars each day.

As someone who hails from Coventry, where James Stanley invented the bicycle in 1868, I think that we need to start going back to the future. We need to look at electric bicycles and at how we design cities that are not for cars. Coventry was rebuilt after the war for cars, not for people, but we need to design cities where people can move and breathe, and where we can make short journeys around through active travel, and save the health service and ourselves a lot of pain, a lot of hassle and a lot of money.
are walking up and down the pavements doing their day-to-day chores. We have seen traffic levels rise year on year, with many more cars and lorries, and therefore more pollution, which means an increased risk to public health.

The reason why Camelford suffers from all this congestion and pollution is that the A39 runs right through the town centre. The A39 is a busy road running down the centre of North Cornwall, connecting some of the constituency’s biggest towns, which are very popular with tourists, and the road is used heavily in the summer months. It is an important road for connecting Devon and Cornwall, heavily used by heavy goods vehicles, with lots of agricultural movements every day. The high number of local farms means that there is lots of farm traffic, as well as lorries travelling to and from the various communities dotted along the road.

In general, the road is quite free-flowing. It is a single carriageway that dips in and out of valleys, as is normal in the Cornish countryside, and around various twists and turns. The road does not encounter much congestion until we get to Camelford town. The road narrows as it reaches the town centre, and the traffic is funnelled into a very narrow high street. Anyone who has been to Cornwall will know that we built much of our housing on the side of roads, and you do not have to walk far off the pavement to be in someone’s house. Some of the buildings on the road are three or four storeys high and are very close to the cars passing in the immediate vicinity, which means the pollution cannot easily escape. That has been proven by tests conducted by Cornwall Council in pollution hotspots near the town centre. Traffic cannot flow in both directions at the same time as the town centre has a traffic light shuttle system, and there are chicanes and lights to stagger traffic. That causes queues, frustration, delays, noise and pollution, and threatens the wellbeing of my constituents and those living along the road or taking their children to the nearby school.

Because of the pollution and air quality issues, Cornwall Council has had to place Camelford in an air quality management area under the Environment Act 1995. Those management areas can be introduced when a local authority knows that levels of seven different pollutants exceed domestic or EU limits. In 2016, the council found high levels of carbon monoxide in Camelford, which are directly attributable to the motor vehicles passing along the A39. The air quality assessment found that the daily average number of vehicles passing through the town centre in 2015 was 6,028, up by almost 1,000 or 25% from 2011. With regard to pollutants, the assessment found that carbon monoxide levels were present in a variety of locations and that they exceeded the UK’s annual mean objective.

As part of the air quality management area process, the council has developed a draft action plan, which went out to consultation earlier this year. The action plan focuses on the option of a bypass, which it has concluded would be the most effective way of dealing with the congestion in the town centre. In tandem with that work, Cormac, which is part of Cornwall Council, has published an options appraisal report that lays out the options for remedying the congestion issues. The report concludes that either a HGV diversion route should be implemented or a bypass should be constructed, and it soundly recommends that the best long-term solution to the problem in the town would be a bypass.

The population of Camelford will grow substantially over the years, and it is imperative that we nip this problem in the bud as soon as possible. In the next 15 to 20 years, there will be thousands more vehicles passing along the road every week, leading to higher carbon monoxide levels and putting my constituents’ health at risk. I feel that it would be a dereliction of my duty if I did not talk about this issue and raise it in the House.

As the Minister will know, the Department for Transport is working on a new major roads network, which will map out the various major roads around England that are not part of the strategic road network. The draft MRN includes the A39 in North Cornwall, which means that the construction of a bypass could be funded through the multimillion-pound funding streams available through the MRN. A bypass would not only address the poor air quality but facilitate economic growth and unlock land for housing.

Poor air quality remains the most important issue. My constituents deserve to live in a community that does not suffer from these high levels of pollution. When debating the NHS and public health, Members and health experts often say that prevention is better than cure. Camelford is a prime example of that principle. The signs are that air quality is getting poorer and we know that traffic levels will get higher and that the town will get bigger. A bypass is the only long-term solution, and I hope that both DEFRA and the Department for Transport will make it possible for my constituents and their children to go about their day-to-day lives in a healthy environment. I fully support the Government’s manifesto commitment to leave the environment in a better state than we found it in, but it is issues such as this that will define whether we are true to our word.

2.14 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It is my view that the House is discussing the biggest public health scandal that Britain faces. As we have heard, air pollution is the second biggest avoidable killer after smoking. Unlike smoking, it is not avoidable for most people—most people do not choose where they live or the air they breathe, and that is particularly the case for children. In most cases, it is invisible, so the level of public and political consciousness about this is not as high as it should be, given the tens of thousands of unnecessary premature deaths a year and all the illnesses that air pollution causes.

We have heard that the cost to business and the NHS is £20 billion a year. Incidentally, the Treasury Minister who appeared before our joint Committee inquiry—the then Exchequer Secretary, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones)—was not aware of that figure, which I thought was appalling. For a Treasury Minister not to be aware of the cost to the public purse of a major health emergency was, in my view, astonishing.

Mary Creagh: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a bit of a running theme with the Treasury, which is very keen to look at the money that it controls, but not very keen to look at how costs are externalised on to other services such as the health service?
Mr Bradshaw: I completely agree.

UNICEF brought out a shocking report last week, which said that one in three children in the United Kingdom are now growing up in areas with unsafe levels of air pollution. It has been widely acknowledged across the House that successive Governments have had insufficient urgency in dealing with this problem. The Government have finally published their draft strategy but, as others have said, it is just not good enough. It is full of further prevarication, delays and half-measures. It passes the buck to local government, which is in many areas under-resourced and under-qualified to deal with this problem.

In my area, for example, we still have a two-tier local authority system. The problem is in the city, where the air is worst, but my Labour city council does not have control over the levers of planning and transportation, which are in the hands of the Conservative-run Devon County Council. It is always difficult to get those two authorities to work together but, on a problem as challenging and expensive as this, they really need more support and strategic lead from the Government.

Lilian Greenwood: Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the communities that are most affected by poor air quality tend to be the most deprived communities, often living close to city centres? It may well be those councils that have suffered the greatest reductions in their spending capability, and we face a real danger of widening health inequalities, as well as those funding inequalities.

Mr Bradshaw: I completely agree. One of my frustrations is that some of the more radical measures, such as congestion charging or workplace carpark charging, have an impact on many people who drive into my city from the rural areas. The politics of a county authority championing those sorts of policy are really hard. I am pleased that progress is being made in Oxford between a Labour city council and a Conservative-run county council. That is a model to take forward, but it is very difficult in two-tier local authority areas.

It is clear to me and to the experts that the draft strategy as it stands will not ensure that we meet our legal requirements, let alone the stricter World Health Organisation air quality recommendations. As we say in our report, we badly need mandated clean air zones—I cannot for the life of me understand why the Government do not just introduce those—and we need practical and real help for individuals and businesses to move to cleaner forms of transport. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who chairs the Environmental Audit Committee, rightly said, we need a massive modal shift in transport in our towns and cities. Most short journeys in towns and cities that are conducted by car could perfectly easily be done by most able-bodied people by bicycle or foot. As she said, the electric bicycle will revolutionise the way we move around towns and cities.

Mary Creagh: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. When I was in Warsaw the other day, I went to a hire a bike. I accidentally hired an electric bike. I can tell him: when the weather is hot and the hills are hard, that is the only way to go.

Mr Bradshaw: If my hon. Friend does not mind my saying so, she is still a bit too young to have to resort to assistance with her cycling. One of the reasons that we both maintain our svelte shape is that we are both avid cyclists. I am putting off the moment when I have to resort to an electric bike, even given the very challenging hills in my Exeter constituency.

We are seeing progress in some places. As a number of colleagues have mentioned, London has already improved significantly, with big increases in cycling, but that is because of the congestion charge and the provision of designated safe cycle routes. Similarly in my constituency, when we were a cycling demonstration town under the Labour Government, there was significant investment in safe cycle routes. That has all dried up, however, and what support there is for cycling and walking is very patchy; it is not strategic. Again, when we asked the Ministers who came before our joint Committee if they knew how much money was being spent on cycling and walking and where, they simply could not answer the question. They are not monitoring it. There is no collection of the data. All of this needs to be much, much more joined up.

As others have already said, the only reason the Government are doing anything is that they have been forced to by the domestic and European courts. One of my real concerns—the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee touched on this—is that the Government seem to be trying to put off doing anything meaningful until we are out of the European Union and no longer subject to European environmental legislation or the European Court of Justice, with ordinary members of the public unable not only to demand but to enforce their rights through the courts if those rights are not honoured by our own domestic Government. I have a real concern that, if we leave the European Union, we will go back to being the dirty man of Europe, as we were in the early 1970s, before we joined.

Britain has a proud record of being a leader on public health. We had the Clean Air Act 1956, the seatbelt campaign and real success in tackling smoking and drinking, both of which have gone down significantly. However, on air quality, we seem to have a sort of stubborn refusal to act. I have been asking myself why that is. Is it because of a fear of the powerful motorists lobby? Perhaps, but as other hon. Members have said it is motorists inside the vehicles who are being polluted the most—10 times more than those people pushing their children in prams or walking up the street. They may think they are being polluted more, but people in vehicles are actually in much greater danger. A clear publicity campaign about that might persuade a few people to change their minds and their habits.

I believe that clean air is a human right. We have to get out of the mindset—as we have with smoking in public places, incidentally—that vehicles have a God-given right to drive around our towns and cities polluting and fouling the air, and causing serious health problems and costs to our country as a whole. I hope that, when the Government strategy is eventually published, it will have taken on board the concerns that have been raised by Members in the House and the concerns of the experts, and that it really will have some teeth in order to make the difference that this country and the people of this country deserve.
Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):
Last month, the World Health Organisation published a list of the 30 worst polluted areas—those exceeding their limits—in the country. These included, perhaps not surprisingly, London, Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester, but they also included Storrington in my constituency—Storrington was among the 30 worst polluted areas in the whole country. It is worse than that. Compare My Move reported earlier this month that, using the WHO data on the worst pollutants—fine particulate matter—the worst cities for air pollution were Bristol, Stanford-le-Hope, Swansea and Storrington; it called that a city. These places had a higher concentration of pollutants than London. Storrington was the worst place in the south-east.

The “city” of Storrington is in fact a village, of just 7,000 residents, and it is at the foot of the South Downs national park. It is in very picturesque country and it is astonishing that it should be one of the places with the very worst air pollution in the country. The reason is the traffic that is forced through the village. It was declared an air quality management area eight years ago. A low emissions trial was set up, but it was abandoned after just one year because, ironically, there was no mobile phone signal available in that rural area, so the data could not be sent. Some 3% of the traffic through Storrington is made up of heavy goods vehicles, but they are responsible for 30% of the pollution.

Local people know that there is a very good reason traffic is so heavy through Storrington, and why the air pollution is consequently so bad when the traffic queues. The reason is that the traffic is forced up through the downs because of congestion on the A27, which runs at the bottom of the south downs and through my constituency. That was once said or meant to be the coastal highway, but significant parts of it are not dualled and it has very serious congestion, including at Arundel. As a consequence, the traffic aims to miss the congestion on the A27 and instead rat-runs through the historic town of Arundel in my constituency and up through the south downs and downland villages such as Storrington. That accounts for the terrible air quality.

There is, therefore, a very strong environmental case for trying to do something about that traffic. The obvious thing to do is to upgrade the A27 to make the traffic flow freely along what is in any case a very important route economically, as the east-west connection in the south of England. At last—this has been delayed for over three decades—we have a plan for the Arunel bypass. I am very grateful to the Government for announcing the funding for the bypass a few years ago, and Highways England has recently announced the preferred route for the scheme. There are of course some local objections to the bypass, as there always are, but my judgment is that there is overwhelming local support for it, not least because of all the traffic running up through the towns and the air pollution in places such as Storrington as a consequence.

It was, therefore, very surprising and disappointing when the South Downs National Park Authority announced that it would seek a judicial review of Highways England’s preferred route. This is an extraordinary position: a public body, using public funds and through proper consultation, has identified the best route for a bypass; the Government have announced funding for and say is necessary; and another publicly funded body, the South Downs National Park Authority—paying absolutely no regard to the views of local people or local villages in the communities in the South Downs national park—has decided, on what is clearly a purely ideological basis, to seek a judicial review of the route and has tried to prevent it from happening simply because it touches a tiny part of the national park right at the bottom of it.

In fact, everybody knows that this will be a South Downs national park relief road. Highways England official projections show that annually there are 15,287 daily traffic movements on average through Storrington, causing all the congestion and pollution and that, with the Arundel bypass on the preferred route, there would be over 3,000 fewer traffic movements in the first year after the bypass opens—over 20% fewer—and by 2041 there would be nearly 6,000 fewer traffic movements, or 38% fewer. So the bypass would clearly prevent the problems of the traffic queuing in this downland village.

Despite that, we have this attempted judicial review. The meeting was not public. Notice was barely given of it. Where is the accountability for this decision? Why is not the South Downs National Park Authority made party to the collective decisions that ought to be taken by local authorities on environmental matters, including reducing air pollution? Why can it simply stand above that, when it is clearly of such environmental benefit overall to the south downs and the downland communities? Its actions are completely unacceptable, and local communities are rightly very angry at what it is seeking to do.

Another village in my constituency, Cowfold, is also over the statutory limits on air pollution. It exceeds both the EU and the WHO maximum levels. It is an even smaller village, of only 2,000 people, but it sits on the A272, and again there is queuing traffic. It was declared an air quality management area in 2011, but there has been no real action for seven years. Some 4% of the traffic is heavy goods vehicles, but they contribute 37% of the pollution. The parish council wants a very simple thing. It wants signs put up by the side of the main routes that run north and south alongside the village, the A24 and the A23, to discourage heavy goods vehicles from taking the route along the A272.

There are perfectly viable dual carriageway routes that go away from this road and village, and there are means by which to discourage heavy goods vehicles from taking this route, yet we have seen a complete failure by the relevant local authorities to take forward any initiative to do the simple thing of introducing these signs. West Sussex County Council says that there is no evidence to support the contention that heavy goods vehicle traffic would be affected by the signs wherever they might be placed. It needs a feasibility study, but there is no funding for one.

I welcome the Government’s air quality plan published last July—I am not churlish about it as other hon. Members are—because it represents a welcome step towards taking action in places such as Storrington and Cowfold. I note that the Government announced a £255 million implementation fund to support local authorities in conducting things such as feasibility studies, and I think £40 million of that was meant to be made available immediately, so can the Minister confirm that the fund is available to places such as Storrington and Cowfold, so that they can conduct feasibility studies, and that the clean air fund, which the Government also
announced, will be available to those local authorities if they then need to take measures as a consequence of the feasibility studies?

We cannot let this matter drag on. It has affected Storrington and Cowfold for well over a decade. We need energetic joint action by all the local authorities, and that needs to be supported, in the way the Government have suggested, by Government funding so that studies can be commissioned and action taken. At the moment, there has been inertia by all concerned, but when there are rural areas and tiny villages at the foot of the south downs with the very worst air pollution in the country, something is wrong. It is completely avoidable and it is time we did something about it.

2.33 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the Select Committees on bringing forward this important report. Effective action on air quality is now vital and urgent. I live in a town centre with heavy traffic and am, I think, personally affected as much as anyone by poor air quality. I also congratulate hon. Members on a series of first-class, informative and persuasive speeches.

I have a particular interest in the transport aspects of our air quality problems, and I have two proposals to advance today. I have had a long association with transport policy. I was the transport policy officer at the TUC in the 1970s, and later I worked on transport policy at the National and Local Government Officers’ Association, which became part of Unison. NALGO and others put forward a proposal to transfer the whole cost of vehicle licensing to fuel. We have a sliding scale now, but it is less effective than transferring the total cost to fuel. The advantages are that it would promote and encourage the use of fuel-efficient vehicles—hybrids and electric vehicles, in particular—and deter excessive vehicle usage and mileage. For many, it is necessary to own a vehicle. Less well-off people who live in rural areas depend on private motor transport, and having a cheaper vehicle would be better for them, while it would deter excessive car usage by better-off people—those like ourselves who perhaps drive our cars more than we should. I still believe that such a policy would be sensible, even though successive Governments have rejected the idea, at least so far, and that it should be given further consideration.

My second interest, and my primary concern, is to advance the case for GB Freight Route, a scheme to build a freight priority railway line from the channel tunnel to Glasgow, linking all the major economic regions of Britain to the continent of Europe. It would take 5 million lorry journeys off our roads each year and save millions of tons of toxic emissions. We would need to make possible the carriage of lorry trailers and lorries on trains, however, as significant modal shift for freight from road to rail cannot take place unless lorry trailers can be transported on trains. Our historic rail network cannot carry such traffic because of loading gauge restrictions. The tunnels and bridges are too small and too tight to accommodate lorry trailers on trains.

GB Freight Route would overcome that problem. It would be constructed on old track bed and under-utilised lines and has been precisely designated as a route. Sites for terminals where lorry trailers would be lifted on and off trains have been identified, close to motorways serving our major cities and regions. GB Freight Route has major support from a wide range of interests including major hauliers, Eurotunnel, supermarket logistics departments and many others. I have made many presentations, including to Rail Ministers in the past, and intend to carry on doing so.

I should declare an interest—a non-pecuniary interest, I emphasise—as a member of the team promoting GB Freight Route. We have received support from a transport consultancy and a major railway equipment company, which have raised the matter with the Transport Secretary. Other members of our team include experienced railway engineers, a major haulier and a member with city experience and links. We have, then, a wide range of skills in our team promoting the scheme.

Today is perhaps not the time to go into great detail about GB Freight Route, but I hope it will be supported by all those concerned about the air quality crisis that affects us all in Britain and which must be addressed. GB Freight Route can and should make a substantial contribution to improving air quality, especially in and around our cities, and I hope that hon. Members will consider supporting it and urge the Government to give it serious and positive consideration.

2.37 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who has great knowledge of this area.

I am delighted to speak in this debate, partly because I was a member of the joint inquiry that produced the report, but also because my family has been affected by a lung condition of unknown origin. My mother suffered from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a life-limiting condition diagnosed in about 6,000 new patients each year—it used to be 5,000 each year. Life expectancy from the time of diagnosis is as short as three years for half of those 6,000 people, with one in five surviving for five years—soon for longer, I hope, with the new treatments available. As the name suggests, no one knows what causes it. My mother did not smoke, so it was not that, but it could have been air quality—or, more correctly, poor air quality. We need to do whatever we can to tackle any root cause of lung disease, as no one should have to struggle for breath as my mother did.

I wish to focus on three areas. First, just yesterday I was talking to constituents of mine who had just brought a hybrid car. I was astounded when they informed me that there is only one public charging point in Long Eaton, one of my major towns, and that it is at a hotel, and therefore behind car park barriers. The joint inquiry highlighted the problem that there are too few charging points to support a wider uptake of such vehicles, and this rings warning bells for me. I can envisage a situation comparable to that which we have with mobile phones and broadband coverage—providers falling over themselves to provide services in highly populated areas, while the more rural areas miss out. The patchwork approach to funding and delivering charging points simply is not working. I therefore call upon the Government to do whatever they can to facilitate the installation of adequate infrastructure, to support the UK’s transit away from polluting vehicles. I would appreciate an
update from the Minister today regarding the Government’s investment in electric vehicle infrastructure. The report’s recommendation for the Government to work with the National Grid and local authorities to identify the key practical barriers preventing a more rapid roll-out is, in my opinion, very valid.

My constituents yesterday also informed me that there are in the region of 30 providers, all requiring different apps to access their charging points. As petrol and diesel cars are phased out in the coming years, the practicalities of charging points also need to be considered.

Secondly, there was evidence in the report that it is of paramount importance for air quality monitoring to be carried out at key spots in local communities, such as near schools, hospitals and, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned, care homes. The Government’s acknowledgment that those changes need to be made is key, and the monitoring is very welcome because, as with any issue, knowledge is power. Data collected as a result of that monitoring should be disseminated to schools, nurseries and hospitals, with clear advice actions that need to be taken. That will also ensure that information can be available for families, empowering parents to make the right decisions for their children. As the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) highlighted, current data shows that a third of our children are living in areas of the UK with unsafe levels of particulate matter, so we need to take much more rapid action.

Thirdly, I shall discuss my local area. I have a combination of a wish list and an update on what is happening in Erewash and the wider Derby and Nottingham area. The World Health Organisation has reported that both Derby and Nottingham are among the 44 cities in Britain that have air that is not safe to breathe. I therefore plead with local authorities to put tackling that problem at the very top of their agenda. HS2 in the future, and improvements in rail infrastructure such as Ilkeston’s new station, can help to reduce the amount of road traffic heading into our cities.

Derby, famous for “planes, trains and automobiles”, is a highly strategic area for research and development of cleaner, greener transport for the future. The next-generation Auris hybrid car is to be built at Toyota in Burnaston, safeguarding around 3,000 jobs into the 2020s. It has also secured an investment of £240 million in the plant there.

We have heard from the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) of some of the initiatives that Nottingham city is taking, and I want to add a few items to that list. The University of Nottingham, in partnership with firms such as Rolls-Royce, is leading the way in R&D of cleaner, greener, more efficient engines. The university is also gaining a new £23 million research facility to drive breakthroughs in treatment and diagnosis of serious diseases, including respiratory conditions.

To return to Derby, the construction of a new nuclear advanced manufacturing research centre in Derby, which I mentioned during the urgent question today, would enable further research into and development of clean energy, as the UK looks to civil nuclear as a way of securing its power needs for the future. That would include exploring the viability of small modular reactors; as mentioned earlier, Rolls-Royce is leading the way in that as well.

Many exciting projects are being undertaken across the Derby and Nottingham corridor, and indeed throughout the country, that will make a contribution to improving air quality. However, we have no time to lose, so I urge the Government to do whatever they can to ensure that action is taken at scale and pace.

2.44 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to be called to make a brief contribution to this debate. I congratulate the Select Committees on their reports. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for his excellent introductory speech. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who made her trademark thoughtful contribution to the debate.

I want to focus on the River Thames. It is busier now than it has ever been—even than its heyday in the ‘30s—due to containerisation, so congratulations to London Gateway, Tilbury and the other access ports. I commend inner-London river traffic: Bennett’s Barges, Thames Clippers and the tourist fleet, including the excellent City Cruises. I will return to Thames construction traffic in a moment, but first I want to mention river crossings in London. East of Tower Bridge, there are more than 20 crossings over the Thames. East of Tower Bridge, where estimates say half of London’s population now live, there are only two river crossings between the Tower of London and Dartford. The static traffic and massive congestion through and around the Blackwall tunnel is a huge source of emissions and pollution, contaminating the whole of east London and drifting westward.

I commend the Department for Transport and Mayor Khan for recently confirming the construction of the Silvertown tunnel from Greenwich to Newham. However, it is worth remembering that it took five years to convince Mayor Livingstone that his manifesto against east London river crossings was wrong, and after him, it took three years to convince the right hon. Gentleman who is now Foreign Secretary, when he was Mayor of London, that his own manifesto against east London river crossings was wrong. Fortunately, Mayor Khan has arrived convinced of the need for these crossings, and with DFT support the Silvertown tunnel has now been given a green light. I would welcome the Minister’s confirmation of that, and perhaps an update on other possible river crossings, with public transport access, which would be very welcome indeed and in line with recommendation 15 of the report and the Government response. Tolling might be needed to help pay for those, because obviously they come at a cost.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that a case has been made for a lower Thames crossing—a tunnel for traffic that would take some of the traffic away from my hon. Friend’s constituency? It might, we suggest, be combined with a rail tunnel for GB Freight Routes. That would cut costs and be a very convenient crossing for both.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend is a well-known champion of rail freight transportation, and in his speech he made the case quite well for the construction of a national link. Were there to be a lower Thames
crossing, obviously one would expect the authorities, local, regional and national, to get the biggest bang for the taxpayer’s pound, to ensure that we get the maximum benefit. The London Underground, which is positive—anything that brings more tourists to London is to the benefit of London’s economy and the wider UK, because when tourists get here, they can travel more widely. The problem, however, is how to power these large vessels when they are moored on the Thames between Greenwich and Tower Hamlets. I have been working with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) to address local residents’ concerns, and I pay tribute to his campaigning skills and efforts on his constituents’ behalf.

However, there is one issue affecting the Thames that is causing concern: the plan to build a cruise terminal at Enderby Wharf in Greenwich. I do not mean the proposal for the terminal, which is positive—anything that brings more tourists to London is to the benefit of London’s economy and the wider UK, because when tourists get here, they can travel more widely. The problem, however, is how to power these large vessels when they are moored on the Thames between Greenwich and Tower Hamlets. I have been working with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) to address local residents’ concerns, and I pay tribute to his campaigning skills and efforts on his constituents’ behalf.

The majority five-to-four planning decision of Greenwich Council to approve the application, which did not require shore-to-ship power, has caused great consternation on both banks among residents. The EFRA Committee has looked at this matter in previous inquiries. Neither the Port of London Authority nor the Environment Agency, the Mayor of London, the Government, or the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, which are all affected by the London Borough of Greenwich’s decision, can alter or amend its approval. The prospect of large cruise ships having to run their equally large diesel engines to power the vessels when they are moored on the river for up to 155 days a year is not positive. Ports on the west coast of the USA, in Scandinavia and in other parts of the EU are bringing in regulations to require shore-to-ship power, called “cold ironing”. Southampton is also looking at this so that ships take the energy from the national grid. Given the challenges of air quality in London, will the Minister advise the House what can be done to make the cruise terminal not just a success, but a clean success?

In conclusion, there is a real risk that we will lose the terminal due to the controversy over this issue. That would be greatly disappointing. We want the investment and the employment, and we would love the tourists. We just do not want it at a dirty price.

2.53 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this very welcome debate, and it was a great pleasure, too, to serve on the Joint Committee. My first point is about that Joint Committee: having inquiries that more than one Select Committee can participate in is a very welcome development. I urge the House to consider how more such inquiries might be facilitated. Earlier today we had a statement from the Health and Social Care Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee on long-term care. Bringing expertise from a range of perspectives is very helpful and I would like to see more of it.

There are five brief points I would like to contribute to the debate. The first picks up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), which is that too often we have silo thinking in government and a lack of effective cross-departmental co-operation. It goes further than just policymaking, however. There has to be a change in culture in how schemes are budgeted for and evaluated for cost-effectiveness. Increasingly, we find that where expenditure might lie with one Department the benefit will accrue somewhere else, so it will not show up in the
usual Treasury reporting of finances. For example, funding for a transport scheme would come from the Department for Transport or local government, but the Department of Health and Social Care might see the benefits because fewer people suffer conditions relating to poor air quality. I therefore urge the Government to start thinking a little bit more about that.

The second issue I would like to raise—I beg the indulgence of the House, but it is quite a techy point—is the Oslo effect. When we look at particle emissions from cars, too often we focus only on tail-pipe emissions. The Oslo effect occurs from invisible and odourless small particles going into the atmosphere as a result of brakes being applied, rubber tyres wearing down on the road, and even bitumen particles being thrown up when tyres hit the road. It may not sound a lot from any one individual car, but the cumulative effect, particularly in areas with high-sided buildings, can be substantial. Some studies show that only one third of particle emissions from cars actually comes from the tail pipe, with two thirds coming from those other sources.

This is a little bit counter-intuitive and I am certainly not arguing against the uptake of low-emission vehicles and moving to hybrid and electric cars, but like for like, those vehicles are heavier than their petrol or diesel equivalents. Therefore, the Oslo effect is exacerbated by those heavier cars. Manufacturers need to be encouraged to look at making cars as light as possible and to research other substances that could be used in place of rubber for brake pads and tyres. It also affects buses, which are by nature much heavier vehicles. I encourage Members—I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on the Department of Health and Social Care—towards the all-party group on trams and light rail—not just to think immediately of buses as the best local transport solution. Trams may have a higher capital investment to begin with, but the savings they might deliver will accrue over a longer period of time. I also chair the all-party group on the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, which will be developing many new settlements over the next few decades. Each of those new settlements will have to develop local transport plans. This would be an ideal place to start looking at new and effective public transport solutions that are, as other Members have suggested, not car-centric, and at making it easier for people to walk or cycle to their destinations.

That leads me on to my third point, which is on cycling. I too have started cycling in London, from here to my home in London which happily resides in the constituency of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I too cycle past the monitor that the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) mentioned in my speech on Monday. New technologies are available that will reduce emissions from the existing airport. One example is the TaxiBot, an autonomous electric vehicle which will take planes from the stand to the runway without the need to switch on the aircraft engines.

I therefore urge the Government to start thinking a little bit more about that.

Dr Whitford: As an electric bike owner—I tried not to take offence at the comments of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) about electric bike owners—I know that there are two classes of electric bikes, one of which is allowed in cycle lanes and one of which is not. I wonder whether it is that difference about which the hon. Gentleman is hearing.

Iain Stewart: I am very grateful for that information. I was not aware that there were two classes of electric bikes, and I will certainly look into it. I imagine there is a great deal of confusion among people who own or might want to purchase an electric bike, and a bit more clarity might be helpful.

My fourth point concerns the use of new technology. We must always be looking into how new technology might be deployed to reduce transport emissions. I certainly do not want to reopen the debate about Heathrow, but time constraints prevented me from expanding on this subject in my speech on Monday. New technologies are available that will reduce emissions from the existing airport. One example is the TaxiBot, an autonomous electric vehicle which will take planes from the stand to the runway without the need to switch on the aircraft engines.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I too am aware of various initiatives, but would the hon. Gentleman care to tell us to what extent and by what proportion such initiatives will reduce air pollution, and by when they will be implemented? I do not remember seeing that in the documents from the Department for Transport.

Iain Stewart: I am afraid that I do not have the figures relating to the actual effect, but I do know that the technology to which I have just referred is already being implemented at Frankfurt airport. It is a proven technology, and it does make a difference. I appreciate that it may not deal with the overall, wider issues relating to air quality and airports, but that single step will help.

My final point will be very brief. The diesel scrappage scheme has been mentioned today. I urge caution on that, because it can be a very blunt instrument and can affect less affluent people disproportionately. The Committees received evidence from the British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association, which has suggested, for instance, that drivers of polluting diesel vehicles should be offered mobility credits for public transport or electric bikes, rather than a cash sum or a trade-in sum.

Let me end by thanking the Committee’s staff for making our inquiry so enjoyable and thought-provoking. I look forward to the Government’s taking up many of our recommendations.

3.2 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the joint report, the introduction to the debate by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and the speeches made by other Chairs and members of the Committees. It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who focused on particulates. We must not forget that, even if we all move to electric vehicles very soon, there will still be particulates from brake linings, from the road surface itself and from tyres.

I share the concern that has been repeatedly expressed by the Committee members who have spoken today about the lack of action and serious commitment from
the Government on the important issue of air quality. Unlike the Governments of comparable countries, the UK Government seem to be taking this country back by decades. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cycling—along with the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is no longer present—I particularly welcome the report’s recommendations on active travel. It points out that walking and cycling are not only good for our physical health, but for our mental health. However, they also make good business sense. Let me give two examples.

First, we know that streets in which pedestrians and bikes have priority over cars, which are either permanently or partially excluded, are more commercially successful, as they tend to contain busy shops and places to eat and drink, and low vacancy rates.

Secondly, when the east-west super-cycle highway that goes past this building was at risk of stalling under the previous London Mayor, now the Foreign Secretary, it was a group of Big City companies that pushed to restart that project because they recognised that their staff who cycled to work had lower sickness rates and were more productive at work. They were making a clear business link with more walking and more cycling.

We also have responsibilities as a place where people come to visit for all sorts of meetings. I was concerned to hear that we have been alerted to a change of policy on security in this House. Of course, security is paramount. However, for many years, visitors with folding bikes have been able to bring them to their meetings in this House, and they are now being told by security that they cannot do so. People with Bromptons do not generally go around with bike locks, so they do not have the option at security to take them out and lock them on a nearby cycle rack. That certainly concerns me.

I now want to move on to my own constituency. The local air quality is particularly poor. The A4, the M4, and the A316—the London end of the M3—all pass through our area, which is frequently in breach of air quality limits. Our schools are alert to this issue. St Mary’s Catholic primary school in Chiswick, one of two schools alongside the A4 and one of 50 across London identified as needing an air quality audit by the London Mayor, is now considering a green wall against the A4 and air purifiers, but both of those cost money to install and maintain. Without action by local, regional and national government, St Mary’s children will continue to breathe in air that is poisoning them as they learn and play.

I am proud of the work that the London Borough of Hounslow is doing on this issue. Last week, it held an anti-idling event outside St Mary’s, with volunteers from the school and parents approaching drivers in cars who were sitting there waiting for children with their engines idling and warning them of the dangers of this. Hounslow is enforcing idling hotspots in the borough. It is working with GPs to promote an air quality text service for people with lung and heart problems, who are most affected when air pollution levels get high, to warn them not to go outside—not an ideal solution because it does not deal with the actual problem. Hounslow is also rolling out electric vehicle on-street charging columns and providing free cycle training.

Through the Greater London Authority, the London Mayor is rolling out his ultra-low emission zone. I would like it to go further out towards the M25, but it is a good start. There is also the T-charge, and Mayor Khan is promoting low and zero-emission bus fleets. But all this is not enough without a Government who are taking the issue seriously, with real legislative action. Given that the UK has consistently been in breach of the nitrogen dioxide limits since they became binding in 2010, the Government should not merely enable but enforce, and take action to bring the UK within those limits. A targeted diesel scrappage scheme, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South said, should not punish those on low incomes and should be nuanced. We also need a comprehensive 21st-century clean air Act.

I cannot sit down without mentioning the runway 3 expansion. The Government cannot be in compliance with air quality limits and allow the expansion of Heathrow airport. That would increase nitrous oxide emissions by 26% above “do nothing”, according to the airports commission that the Government themselves set up. In the Government’s announcement on the draft national policy statement last year, the Secretary of State said that a third runway would put the UK in breach of air quality standards, but in his announcement on Monday he said that it could be achieved while remaining compliant. A similar argument was being made 10 years ago, yet the area is still consistently exceeding air quality limits.

There is no credible explanation from the Secretary of State for Transport as to how Heathrow can expand and compliance be achieved. Furthermore, in all the cost-benefit analysis the Department has done it has not monetised the health impacts on the local population. Moreover, polluting emissions from planes are undoubtedly part of the mix but are seldom mentioned in policy documents. The reality is, however, that the bulk of the air pollution around Heathrow is from vehicular traffic, and a lot of that traffic is connected with airport operations and associated business. Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd said runway 3 could be built and have 50% more passengers and twice the amount of cargo business without any more vehicular traffic. There is no modelling to justify this incredible statement. Neither the airport nor the Government are prepared to fund more transport infrastructure. Only Transport for London has done the modelling, and it has clearly demonstrated to the Transport Committee that Heathrow’s assertion is impossible to achieve. In any case, new rail infrastructure is being discussed. Crossrail is coming online soon, and we are still dithering about the western and southern rail links, which are needed now with the current demands from people going in and out of Heathrow airport to work and travel.

The Government have already lost three legal challenges on their air quality policies, not unconnected with Heathrow. As I have said, there is growing evidence of the ground impact of pollution from planes. How is expanding Heathrow, in an area of the country already consistently in breach of legal limits on air quality, doing anything to stop the UK going back to being the dirty man of Europe?

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on setting the scene for us all as he so often does, and it is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). We have a clear difference of opinion on Heathrow, but that is by
the way; I appreciate her comments, and I appreciate the efforts of all the Members who have made valuable contributions so far and those who will do so later.

As a country sports enthusiast, conservation is a core principle that I adhere to, as do all country sports enthusiasts. How to improve our environment and preserve what we have is a key theme. Some 3 million people per year die due to air pollution worldwide and 40 000 people die early deaths as a result of pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide in the UK every year, with the nitrogen dioxide limit values having been unlawfully breached since 2010, as has been said.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s “Tenith Special Report” lists many effects of exposure to air pollution, ranging from cardiovascular diseases to premature birth. It also states that it is children and older people who suffer the most, as exposure to air pollution can result in stunted growth or affect the normal growth of lungs or lead to a child being born prematurely and facing the risk of death during the first year of life as a result of respiratory illness. For older people, there can be accelerated decline in lung function and an increased risk of lung cancer. That means that pollution is becoming more dangerous for the population of the UK as we are an ageing society with about 23% of the population aged 60 and above. If there needs to be a reason for doing something and for this report being followed up by Government today, that is it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I had hoped to be present earlier to contribute to the debate, but may I, in agreeing with the hon. Gentleman, ask if he will acknowledge that many of us face planning applications for large-scale housing and other developments in our constituencies—in my case, there is an application involving 600 houses and a new branch of Ikea which would lead to 2 million customer journeys a year on the busiest road in Sussex—yet air quality factors seem to feature very low in consideration of such planning applications? Does he agree that, for all the reasons he mentioned, these factors should receive a much higher priority in our assessment of whether applications are sustainable for the local population?

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is a major development application in my constituency at Comber town for 800 houses. Infrastructure is an important consideration: how the roads will work and whether they can take the increased number of journeys, and whether the schools and hospitals can take it. They are all critical factors, and air quality should be considered in looking at these big questions.

Given the vulnerability of older people to pollution, it is important to improve air quality so that we can reduce the number of deaths and address the issue. There should be Government support for renewable energy, which would limit the use of fossil fuels so that harmful substances such as nitrous oxide, sulphur dioxide and carbon dioxide would not be produced in large amounts and air quality would be improved. That is the very issue that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) referred to his intervention. I was supportive of the SeaGen initiative in Strangford Lough in my constituency, which would provide clean energy. It was a really good project, and the pilots were successful but unfortunately the funding to take it further did not happen.

The formation of a thriving public transport system is a major way of improving air quality. I hail from a rural constituency in Strangford, where there are no trains or tubes. There are only buses, and they are infrequent owing to the low population in the area. That means that there is a lot of work to be done there. For some of my constituents, taking a five-minute phone call at the end of the day could mean that they return home an hour late. The bus service is obviously not as frequent as it is here in London and elsewhere. There must be greater ring-fenced funding for public transport in rural areas. This would allow public transport to run at a loss for a longer period, to enable people to understand that the public transport system could merge with their working day and work-life balance needs. This is about striking a balance in the rural community. Public transport needs to be financially viable but it also needs to provide a service.

I completely concur with the recommendation that the Government give priority funding to infrastructure that would help us to meet air quality objectives. Examples include the cycling and walking investment strategy, the Transforming Cities fund and the initiatives to support the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles. The Bus Services Act 2017 includes a range of measures to improve bus services through franchising and better partnership working. It is also great news that £48 million has been supplied for the new ultra-low emission bus scheme to enable local authorities and bus operators to purchase ultra-low emission buses and support infrastructure. I give credit to the Committee and its report, and also to the Government for the initiatives that they have set in place. That is not enough, however.

Infrastructure that aids in improving these programmes would help by reducing idling and journeys, with low-emission buses aiding the fulfilment of the programme and allowing for superior air quality throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This would improve the quality of life for those who may be vulnerable, and those who are vulnerable, to pollution, but there needs to be a focus on rural areas. With respect to those who have spoken so far in the debate, the majority have talked about urban areas. I am not saying that they should not do so, because that is where the problems are, but we need to look at the bigger picture and see how these problems affect rural areas as well. Comber town, which I mentioned earlier, is a small rural town, and the impact of 800 houses will be quite large. I am not saying that that should not happen; I am saying that we need to prepare for it. In the large metropolitan areas of the UK, the amount of road pollution is substantial. The initiative to introduce low-emission buses will not resolve that issue, but it will lessen its severity.

I agree with the response that indicates that there will be air quality monitoring in key areas of local communities such as schools, care homes and hospitals. In fact, this is already in place in Northern Ireland, where air quality monitoring is carried out by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, along with district councils. Two monitoring stations, at Lombard Street in Belfast and Brooke Park in Londonderry, are the only
stations that measure multiple pollutants, but many other places carry out monitoring, making information widely available for all who need it.

I welcome the £3.5 billion investment that has been provided for the clean air strategy, which aims to cut all forms of air pollution, with recommendations from the World Health Organisation, and introduces primary legislation to grant local government the ability to take decisive action to solve any issues. We cannot ignore what is happening elsewhere in the world. The report focuses on what is happening in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but there are other partners—other countries across the world that need to play their part as well. If we are playing our part here, they need to play their part as well.

The biggest causes of pollution in Northern Ireland are road traffic and domestic emissions. These can be curbed, and many attempts are being made to do that. Less reliance on fossil fuels and more on renewable resources will allow Northern Ireland to decrease the amount of pollution emitted as a result of domestic life.

If Northern Ireland adopted a clean bus programme, as is less reliance on and usage of fossil fuels will lessen pollution. The money spent on initiatives such as the £600,000 for many cyclists, walkers and runners, connecting east Belfast with Comber. The investment of almost £600,000 will allow people to ride their bikes safely from Comber to Newtownards to allow more people in that commuter town to choose a healthier and more stress-free way of getting to work, so that they help the environment and themselves.

These schemes are funded by infrastructure budgets as well as communities. They are a wonderful way of improving air quality and health. I look forward to the Minister’s response. It is important that we do something to improve air quality not only in towns, but in rural communities.

3.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): One of the first big steps forward on air quality came after the great smog of 1952, when 4,000 people died within five days and 8,000 died in the following weeks. From that came the Clean Air Act 1956, which reduced pollution, particularly from coal, coming from industrial and domestic sources. However, in the 50 years since, traffic pollution has soared. Some 70% of UK towns and cities are defined as unsafe, with 37 out of 43 clean air zones failing on nitrous dioxide. There is a road in Lambeth that, every single year since 2010, has reached the number of breaches it is allowed in a year by the end of January.

The issue is not only about nitrous dioxide. Particulates have been mentioned—the 10 micrometres, and, more particularly, the 2.5 micrometres. These tiny particles get much further into the lungs and cause more damage. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, that damage particularly affects children and older people. Some 4.5 million children—a third of them—are exposed to unsafe levels. If they live near a busy road, they have twice the rate of respiratory problems. We are talking not only about asthma, the obvious one, but about reduced lung development and—if mothers were exposed during pregnancy—reduced brain development. Such things will lay down the quality of a child’s life before they are even born. Among older people, particulates increase the deterioration in lung function, as well as causing ischemic heart disease, increased rates of dementia and stroke.

Pressure in this country has developed only because of the threat of legal action from the EU last year; the can has been kicked down the road for years. The UK and eight other countries are facing legal action from the EU unless they get serious and radical. We would consider countries such as Germany and France, particularly Germany, to have good public transport. There is a particular need to invest in trains and trams—and in rural areas, in buses. Since transport was deregulated in the 1980s, Strathclyde in the west of Scotland has gone from having an integrated network of trains, tubes and buses to simply a free-for-all of ancient diesel buses all crowding the same roads. We have gone backwards in the past 40 years, and we need to go forwards. In rural areas, it is buses that are important. When it is just left to private companies, small villages quickly lose their bus services, which is not acceptable. We should be radical, and we should look at cities such as Copenhagen, which ripped up a ring road and turned it into a safe cycle route. We need things like that.

We heard from the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) that the cost of lung disease caused by poor air quality is £20 billion, yet we invest less than...
5% of that amount in active travel infrastructure. As I said in an intervention, it comes down to health in all policies.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady has mentioned Copenhagen. Is she aware that 30% of all journeys in Amsterdam are by bicycle, compared with 2% in London? That came about through a real effort of political will many years ago to recreate the city to be fit for cycling.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. My understanding is that 50% of journeys in Copenhagen are now made by bicycle. But this does require investment in infrastructure.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned a new tunnel at Silvertown. The Clyde tunnel was finished in 1963 and it consists of two circular tunnels, with the road deck about a third of the way up and room for cyclists, pedestrians and ventilation underneath. That was back in the ’60s. We need to make sure we are not investing in hugely expensive tunnels that go against active transport.

It is about health in all policies. Decisions are made in silos, even in this place. We make decisions on different days that counteract each other, which is frustrating. If we had physical health and mental wellbeing as an overarching principle like human rights, people sitting in our town halls and here would focus not on cars, on how they drive and how they park—that is the focus in our towns and cities at the moment—but on people. We would design safe, segregated cycle routes, and we would have much wider pavements on which children could ride their scooters, and on which people with prams or wheelchairs would not be crowded out—people would not need to step into the roadway to pass them. When we have such glorious and, in Scotland, very unusual sunny weather, it would also create an environment in which cafes could be outside. People would walk around their town centres and meet their neighbours, which would contribute to a sense of belonging and community. I would love to see health and wellbeing as the driving force in every decision made by town halls, national Government and Westminster on how we design our towns and cities.

Mary Creagh: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: I have finished, I am afraid. Sorry.

3.27 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I feel privileged to respond to this debate for the Opposition. This is my first time at the Dispatch Box, and I am glad we have had such a good debate, with valuable points made and much agreement on both sides of the House, and with most of my speech helpfully already made by others. I will pay tribute to Members as I go through.

In particular, I pay tribute to the superb report from the four Select Committees and to the points raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and by my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield on the MP of the year award she was rightly given at the BusinessGreen leaders awards last night.

We can take two things from this debate. First, there is cross-party consensus that a crisis in air quality has been building for many years. Secondly, a number of voices from all sides, all parties and organisations are saying that the Government have been too slow in addressing this crisis and that more needs to be done. My west country neighbour, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, said that bold action is absent, and he is right.

It is not an understatement to say poor air quality is a genuine public health emergency in our towns. We know that poor air quality and air pollution is linked to cancer, asthma, stroke and heart disease. As we have heard today from my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, poor air quality contributes to the early death of 40,000 people a year. That is 40,000 mums and dads, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters. These are not just statistics; each represents a family tragedy, many of which could be avoided with faster, better, more comprehensive and bold action from Ministers. We are talking about 13 deaths while this debate has been going on. Even the Government accept that they need to do more, so the challenge is: why are they not and can they do better now?

On legal limits, one of the most damning aspects of the Select Committees’ report was the comments from the UN special rapporteur, who said he was “alarmed that despite repeated judicial instruction, the UK government continues to flout its duty to ensure adequate air quality and protect the rights to life and health of its citizens. It has violated its obligations”.

Last year, the Evening Standard found that pollution in more than 50 sites in London had breached EU limits. Further evidence from across the country shows that this is happening not just in the capital, but across the UK. As we have heard today, it is not just in towns and cities, but in rural areas.

Sadly, the Government have had to be dragged through the courts, failing three times on air quality—in April 2015, November 2016 and February this year, when Mr Justice Garnham declared the Government’s failure to require action from 45 local authorities with illegal levels of air pollution in their area “unlawful”. It should not take the courts to get the Government to act on this. I appreciate that the Minister was not in his post at the time, but the Government he represents were.

A recent freedom of information request revealed that the Government have spent £500,000 fighting and losing dirty air court cases, with the most recent costing them £148,135. When we have got nothing from the VW emissions scandal, it is doubly concerning that this money the Government have spent on lawyers could have been spent on mitigations. It could have been spent on walking and cycling, on protecting primary schools from polluting roads or on promoting action on dirty diesel.

We have heard today about particulate matter, which needs further debate. We have heard a lot about PM$_{2.5}$ and PM$_{10}$, but there is too little research and often too little focus on the harmful effects of nanoparticles, which are even smaller than PM$_{2.5}$, and especially on the potential harm of magnetic nanoparticles entering the brain. I encourage the Minister to set out what he thinks can be done to undertake further research on nanoparticles in particular.
Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend has given me something else to worry about on my Committee—I thought it was just nanoplastics we had to be worried about. Does he agree that, whether we are discussing plastics in the ocean or pollution in the air, we have to stop treating our environment—our rivers and our air—as one great big garbage dump, because we are conducting a massive experiment on ourselves and on the planet, and we do not know where it is going to end?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is exactly right and we need to talk about that much more. When we get into the detail of what is being said on not just plastics, but particles and air quality—the air we breathe and the things we throw away—we see that more and more education can produce better results.

In today’s debate, we have heard far too many examples of young people being exposed to harmful levels of particulate matter, as well as carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide and low level ozone. Our young people deserve better than breathing poor air, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is right to say that breathing clean air should be a human right. Exposure to PM$_{2.5}$ should not exceed 10 micrograms per cubic metre of air, according to the World Health Organisation, but in my Plymouth constituency the figure is 12 micrograms. In Saltash, just over the river, it is 11—the annual mean is 18 and 15 respectively.

Prince Rock Primary School, on my patch, knows all about that, as it is located on a busy road. We have heard from many other hon. Members about schools close to busy roads that are affected by poor air quality. Does the Minister have a similar school in his constituency? How many other Members have schools in areas of illegal air quality? The air quality close to our schools does matter. It matters to our young people. What is being done to educate teachers, children and parents about the risk of air pollution? As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) mentioned, turning engines off while idling can help, and walking or cycling to school can make a positive difference. These things all add up, but if initiatives such as the daily mile are through areas with poor air quality, the effect and positive contribution of that work can be limited. All our children deserve to breathe clean air.

The Government must not only talk the talk, but walk the walk. That is why we have heard today about the VW emissions scandal should concern us all. The failure to ban diesel and petrol engines early enough was also mentioned by a number of hon. Members. Britain must wean itself off dirty diesel for many, many years to come. Does the Minister have a similar school in his constituency? How many other Members have schools in areas of illegal air quality? The air quality close to our schools does matter. It matters to our young people. What is being done to educate teachers, children and parents about the risk of air pollution? As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) mentioned, turning engines off while idling can help, and walking or cycling to school can make a positive difference. These things all add up, but if initiatives such as the daily mile are through areas with poor air quality, the effect and positive contribution of that work can be limited. All our children deserve to breathe clean air.

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The Secretary of State for Transport has cancelled rail electrification, something rightly criticised in the recent Transport Committee report. Without rail electrification projects, Britain’s railways are still going to run on dirty diesel for many, many years to come.

We have heard today that the Government far too often work in silos. It is simply not good enough for DEFRA to push out press releases on air quality while the Department for Transport is busy pushing back commitments on diesel engines and cancelling electrification schemes. It does not have to be like this. Members have highlighted the urgent need for a clean air Act, and I am proud to say that Labour would introduce one. We will act on air pollution and deliver clean air for the many, not just the few. That really matters because, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said, this is about social justice. The links are there for all to see between poverty and poor air quality, and between the injustices of poorer communities breathing in poor-quality air and the shame that far too little has been done to help them.

The fact that the poorest communities are hit by the worst air pollution should shame this Government and shame our society. This issue goes right to the heart of inequality: if someone is poorer, the air that they breathe is of a lower standard than the air breathed by someone richer. That should be simply unacceptable in 2018. We need to be bold and tackle this invisible threat head on. Communities throughout the UK are suffering now, and if we do not deal with this, we will leave future generations with poorer health, poorer outcomes and more pollution to deal with. That is simply not acceptable.

The Committee on Climate Change reported today, 10 years after the Climate Change Act was delivered by a Labour Government, and it has delivered a damning verdict on this Government’s record. On air quality specifically, it doubles down on the point that we are not doing enough to modernise our transport sector, particularly the car industry. The report finds that the UK is on track to miss its legally binding carbon budgets in 2025 and 2030, due to lack of progress on car emissions from buildings and transport in particular.

Lord Deben has said that the Government’s pledge to end the sale of pure petrol and diesel cars by 2040 is not ambitious enough, and he believes it is essential that we move the target closer to 2030, as do the Opposition.

We are not short of soundbites or press releases from DEFRA about air quality, but I say to the Minister that it is not the presentation that is at fault; it is the content.
the substance, the plans, the action, the funding and the urgency. We all know what needs to be done, so I encourage him and his Department to get on with it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his maiden speech from the Dispatch Box.

3.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on his excellent speech from the Dispatch Box; I am sure we will hear much more from him in the weeks and months ahead. Well done. Like many other Members, he raised very important issues.

I congratulate those Members who secured and took part in this debate, particularly the Chairs and Members of the four Select Committees, on their detailed and thoughtful joint report on this crucial issue. I recognise all the hard work that must have taken place to get four Select Committees to agree on a consistent position. That must be highly unusual, if not unprecedented. [Interruption.] I hear the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) say “exactly” from a sedentary position. It is because it is an important issue and we recognise that. I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), and this Government are absolutely committed to tackling it.

In January this year, showing our ambition, this Government published our 25-year environment plan, which set out our vision to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. As we leave the EU, we have committed to ensure that our environmental standards are not only maintained, but enhanced.

The very first goal that we set ourselves in the 25-year plan was clean air. Its importance is beyond question. Air pollution—whether from transport, domestic heating or agriculture—affects us all. It is the fourth biggest threat to public health in the UK, after cancer, obesity and heart disease, and that has been highlighted by many Members today, not least by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), and this Government are absolutely committed to tackling it.

There has been progress. Air pollution has reduced significantly since 2010: sulphur dioxide emissions are down by 60%, fine particulate matter, which we all have concerns about, has been reduced by 11%, and emissions of toxic nitrogen oxides are at their lowest level since records began. However, there is no doubt that more needs to be done, and that message has come across loud and clear from the eloquent contributions we have heard in this debate. We are doing more, and we will continue to do so.

We have committed £3.5 billion in funding already for cleaner air and cleaner transport. That money includes almost £1.5 billion to support the uptake of ultra low emission vehicles—one of the most comprehensive programmes of support in the world. The UK is already acknowledged as a global leader in ultra low emission vehicles; one in eight battery electric cars sold in Europe in 2017 was made in the UK. We have said that we want every new car and van to be effectively zero emission by 2040 and that we will end the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by that date.

Lilian Greenwood: Has the Minister not reflected on the views of both the joint report of the Select Committees, which called for that date to be brought forward, and of Lord Deben who this morning talked about the Government’s climate change commitments and called again for that date to be brought forward to 2030. Are the Government not listening to the views that are being expressed?

David Rutley: We are listening. We have seriously considered the points that have been made, and this is an ambitious target. It is very much ahead of what is going on in other parts of the world. There are only six other countries that are ahead of us in proposing those targets.

Mary Creagh: A third of Norway’s vehicle fleet are electric vehicles—actual cars and not the bicycles that I was joking about earlier. It plans to ban the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2025. This is a country that was founded on the oil and gas industry and a country whose sovereign wealth fund is now withdrawing from all oil and gas investments. Why can we not show similar leadership in this country?

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Lady’s point. Lady’s point. We are taking forward a very strong commitment. As I have said, only six other countries—

Mary Creagh: If the hon. Lady will let me, I would like to answer her question. Only six other countries in the world are moving more quickly than the UK on ending petrol and diesel, and the UK is moving faster than almost every other country in the EU, as well as many other countries such as the US and Australia.

The £3.5 billion investment also includes £1.2 billion of available funding for the first ever statutory cycling and walking investment strategy. I know that that has been raised by a number of Members who have talked about what we can do to improve the take-up of cycling and walking. I think that, perhaps, there has been an over representation of the cycling lobby today. As a former member of the mountaineering all-party parliamentary group, the pinnacle of APPGs, we need to speak up for walkers as well. I know that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) fully agrees with me on that important point.

Dr Whitford: Does the Minister recognise, however, the disparity between the cost to the Government through ill health and the amount that is being spent on active transport, be it cycling or walking?

David Rutley: There is more that we need to do, but the £1.2 billion funding in the cycling and walking investment strategy is a first important step, and we need to build on that—no question.
A number of important issues have been raised throughout the debate, and I will address some of them in the time remaining. One issue that has been highlighted is that of what we can do to help raise people’s awareness of the health challenges around air quality. There were important contributions on this topic from my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for South West Bedfordshire, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), and the hon. Members for Wakefield, for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Through the clean air strategy, we are committed to a national information campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of air pollution. We will introduce a personal messaging system to ensure that those who are most at risk receive the information that they need about pollution risks. Public Health England is currently reviewing evidence of the effectiveness of different interventions, and will report its findings to Ministers later this year. This will include advice on the factors affecting behaviour change around air quality.

The Committees have called for a new clean air Act. As announced in our clean air strategy, we will set out new primary legislation to secure a more coherent legislative framework for action to tackle air pollution.

**Neil Parish:** The Minister talks about new legislation. Is that going to be a clean air Act? It is not quite clear.

**David Rutley:** I was just trying to explain what this new primary legislation would include. Perhaps I could progress so that my hon. Friend can see what this will lead to.

The new legislation will be underpinned by new England-wide powers to control major sources of pollution, plus new local powers to take action in areas with air pollution problems. For example, in our clean air strategy consultation we are seeking views on giving local authorities new powers to control emissions from domestic combustion, biomass and non-road mobile machinery.

**Mary Creagh:** What does the Minister think about wood-burning stoves?

**David Rutley:** A number of Members have mentioned the importance of tackling particulate matter. We need to look at all avenues, including wood-burning stoves. The Government have introduced programmes that help people to become more aware of the right wood to burn—that is, wood with a lower moisture content. We need to take this sort of approach to raise people’s awareness, so that they can see what needs to be done to help reduce particulate matter.

I am conscious of the time available. Perhaps I could highlight some of the local issues that have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth made some important points about anti-idling campaigns, and I recognise the good work that has been done in that area by Westminster City Council. There has been a lot of talk about electric bikes and what we must do to make people more aware of where they can and cannot use those cycles. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) was absolutely right to say that we need to look not only at emissions, but at tyres and brakes, because of the resulting particulate matter.

**Neil Parish:** Will the Minister give way?

**David Rutley:** For the last time, because I am conscious that I need to wind up very shortly.

**Neil Parish:** As we are talking about particulates and pollution from nitric oxide, what about the Volkswagen scandal? Why have we not got any money out of that company?

**David Rutley:** My hon. Friend knows, through his service on his Committee, that this is quite a complex issue. There are complex legal and jurisdictional matters that need to be addressed, particularly when it comes to the response to VW’s wrongdoing.

**Neil Parish:** But it’s the oomph, you see.

**David Rutley:** I hear “oomph” from a sedentary position; I will not respond to that again. The vast majority of the potential wrongdoing in the case my hon. Friend mentions occurred in Germany, and the German Government have held VW to account there. There are different regulations in the United States, meaning that it is easier for the US authorities to secure funding from there. We want to ensure that the automotive industry makes more of a contribution.

We need to work in partnership to tackle the problem that we have discussed today, and we are absolutely committed to doing that. We want to work across all levels of government, as has been highlighted today, and with local authorities, businesses, farmers, industry and households to tackle air pollution. I know that there is real enthusiasm across the House, and we need to use that momentum to good effect. I would like to conclude by recognising the important contribution made by the joint inquiry’s report and pay tribute to the quality of the speeches we have heard today. The House can be assured that the Government will continue to engage with the Select Committees on this vital issue in the months ahead.

3.50 pm

**Neil Parish:** I would like to thank all Members for their contributions this afternoon. This House is at its best when we work across the parties and across Committees, as we have done to deliver this verdict on air quality. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) said, the Government want to leave this country and this planet in a better environmental condition than we found them in, and air quality is essential in delivering that. If we are going to deliver a better quality of life for poor and rich alike, we have to make sure that we tackle air quality.

We have had contributions from Members representing urban areas where there is a concentration of pollution, and we must deal with those hotspots. We have also had contributions from Members representing rural areas where roads and other things are causing real problems in towns. We have to make sure that our planning system for not only roads but housing takes account of the need to increase air quality and get rid of pollution.

Working together, we can deliver this. We want to see this Government and others go forward. The Secretary of State is very keen to deliver a much cleaner environment. We must now concentrate on air quality, and not only on transport, bikes and walking but all the ways in
which we can put this right. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. I think we will make a difference, and we must.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Joint Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Environmental Audit, Health and Social Care and Transport Committees, Improving Air Quality, HC 433, and calls on the Government to adopt its recommendations as part of its Clean Air Strategy.

Advisory Committee on Business Appointments

[Relevant Documents: Fourth Special Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Managing Ministers’ and officials’ conflicts of interest: time for clearer values, principles and action: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2016-17, HC 731.]

3.52 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Thirteenth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, HC 252, Managing Ministers’ and officials’ conflicts of interest: time for clearer values, principles and action, on the role and effectiveness of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACoBA); notes that ACoBA regulates applications for business appointments by former Ministers and civil servants who have recently left the public sector; believes that ACoBA is an ineffectual regulator which fails to inspire public confidence or respect; expresses concern that the Committee’s inquiry revealed numerous gaps in ACoBA’s monitoring process with insufficient attention paid to the principles that should govern business appointments; agrees that failures of consecutive governments to address ACoBA’s deficiencies have damaged public trust in politics and public institutions and led to repeated scandals; calls on the Government to bring forward major reform by introducing a principles-based system to ensure that individuals act with integrity and behave according to those principles; and further calls on the Government to fund independent checks by ACoBA across all Government departments and executive agencies to reinforce those principles.

It is the role of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to oversee the UK’s changing constitution and the efficiency of the civil service and the machinery of government. Within that, PACAC covers matters of ethics and propriety in Whitehall, overseeing the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the ministerial code, the special advisers code, the civil service code and the work of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which oversees the rules governing departing Ministers and Crown servants when they take up outside appointments. PACAC has defined its overriding purpose, to quote from our website:

“to conduct robust and effective scrutiny in order to help create conditions where the public can have justified confidence in public services/government.”

In that context, just before the election, PACAC published a new report on ACoBA, entitled “Managing Ministers’ and officials’ conflicts of interest: time for clearer values, principles and action”.

In this House we do not work for ourselves. Our system of government relies on the principle that we who are intertwined with power act only when it is in the public and national interest. The vast majority of public servants do their best, and I certainly understand that. The business appointment rules exist to prevent the conflicts of interest that can arise when former Ministers, special advisers or officials—especially those with high-level Government experience—are looking to take up appointments in the private sector. I am afraid that there are rightly public concerns when senior officials move directly into sectors over which they had until recently had control and influence, including suspicions that the decisions they took may have been influenced
by the hope or expectation of future employment or that a future employer could use official information that they had access to.

The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments—or ACoBA, as it is known for short—is appointed by the Government to advise on the implementation of these rules. The ministerial code requires former Ministers, for two years after leaving office, to consult ACoBA about any employment or consultancy they are looking to take up. ACoBA may recommend that an individual wait for up to two years before taking up a specific appointment, or that they do not undertake types of work falling into specific categories up to the two-year limit. However, the business rules themselves are largely procedural: they do not make explicit when or how former Ministers or officials can or cannot legitimately make use of their prior experience.

In 2014, the rules were updated so that only officials at director general, or equivalent, and above now need to apply to ACoBA. Senior grades below that level are now managed by individual Departments and agencies. There was also a change to retrospective applications, which are no longer accepted. Having to make a decision after a contract had been signed and an appointment taken up was seen as a possible constraint on ACoBA’s scope to advise, because how could it advise on something that had already happened? The updated rules also allowed Departments to continue to pay former officials and special advisers who are required to observe a quarantine period before taking up their new roles. ACoBA has stated that whether or not this pay is available, it will not affect its decision.

PACAC, which I chair, has concluded that ACoBA is a “toothless regulator”. There are serious problems with the system as it currently operates. A number of these problems are institutional, deriving from ACoBA’s structure and the practical realities of how it must function. I wish to make it absolutely clear in this debate that I am not making any personal criticism of the chair or any members of ACoBA. The committee comprises both political appointments and independent members. However, despite Baroness Browning, its chair, telling PACAC that she wanted “every bus driver and hairdresser...to apply” to be an independent member of ACoBA, its composition remains dominated by the great and the good. This is unsurprising given that the criteria for the role include senior level experience in the civil service, the military or business, which is hardly something possessed by most bus drivers or hairdressers. Furthermore, independent members also hold senior posts in the sorts of companies in which those applying to ACoBA may well be seeking to gain employment. There are notable examples of when these independent members have failed to recuse themselves, despite what would appear to be obvious conflicts of interest when considering cases.

Moreover, for lower grades of civil servant—their applications are managed not by ACoBA, but by their own Departments or agencies—what is known as the revolving door is essentially self-regulating. It is not impossible that civil servants, knowing any precedent they set by judging on a particular case might have an impact on their future careers, could unintentionally or otherwise approve appointments that perhaps deserved more scrutiny. However, civil servants in lower grades can still have significant influence in areas where potential conflicts of interest could arise, such as policy development or procurement decisions. Some may have had senior responsible owner roles, where they have taken responsibility for the management of such substantial projects with sizeable budgets, and the private sector finds such experience very valuable. With the increasing interchange between Whitehall Departments and the private sector, this problem is growing.

Putting the problems of scope and propriety to one side, ACoBA simply lacks the powers to allow it to do its job effectively. As the advisory part of its name suggests, ACoBA cannot prevent an individual taking up an appointment, and it has no power to sanction anyone who ignores its recommendations. It makes a recommendation only when an appointment has been accepted, and does not make ex ante stipulations about the types of employment an individual may or may not engage in. It therefore relies on individuals coming to it for advice or with an application. It has very little capacity to investigate those who do not do so or to monitor non-compliance. We were told that ACoBA found that LinkedIn was a more comprehensive source of the employment histories of former officials than the disclosures of those officials themselves.

With resources failing to keep pace with ACoBA’s increased caseload, this embarrassing state of affairs is unlikely to change, meaning that a body intended to improve public trust in government will have to continue to trawl social media for vital information. Evidence shows that ACoBA is simply not being taken seriously. Frequently, applicants have taken up their role before ACoBA has considered their case and made any recommendations, and sometimes these recommendations are simply ignored. We were told that too many former Ministers and officials viewed ACoBA as a rubber stamp before pursuing a lucrative corporate career that might be perceived to conflict with their previous public responsibilities.

Departments take responsibility for those below ACoBA’s threshold, but we were told that monitoring was inconsistent and some agencies failed to publish the required data completely. There is evidence that this can result in too close a relationship between certain Departments and the companies working in related industries. Freedom of information requests in 2012 found that more than 3,500 former senior military officers and Ministry of Defence officials had been approved for arms company jobs since 1996. There might be nothing intrinsically wrong with those appointments, but the failure to have any sanction over them results in a lack of public confidence.

In the absence of a robust system of regulation, high-profile cases, such as that of the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, threaten public confidence in the integrity of government. I make no comment about Mr Osborne, but after leaving government he accepted a post with the BlackRock Investment Institute, part of the investment management company BlackRock Investment Group. As Chancellor, he had had contact with BlackRock and its competitors in the field. Significantly, as Chancellor, he had introduced the Taxation of Pensions Act 2014, which materially benefited BlackRock.

Our report made no comment on Mr Osborne’s conduct, except to document that he had taken up the appointment, but it raises questions about how effective
the system of regulation is, because it does not inspire public confidence. He complied with the business appointment rules for former Ministers, and ACoBA considered his case, but because the current process commands so little confidence, its decision to approve the appointment has been questioned, and it has done little to enhance his reputation to have ACoBA as a protection. Among Mr Osborne’s other post-ministerial appointments is his editorship of the Evening Standard, a position he accepted without waiting for ACoBA to reach a decision at all. This might have been for perfectly understandable reasons.

Our report made a number of recommendations that would improve the confidence ACoBA commands but crucially without recourse to a statutory system. These related to the availability of data for those below the threshold for ACoBA review, the transparency of the lobbying process and the need for ACoBA to be adequately resourced. Crucially, underpinning all this, we concluded that there needed to be a clear statement of values and a clear setting out of principles to be talked about, taught and discussed. to inform and guide behaviour and to make it clear when behaviour falls below those standards.

I am very disappointed that in their response the Government rejected all but some minor procedural recommendations and even denied the seriousness of the problems we are confronting in the House of Commons today. We agreed with ACoBA when it said there should be a single collated list of decisions taken by Departments and agencies so that at least the self-regulated departmental aspect might be more exposed to public view. The Government rejected even this minor suggestion.

PACAC—and before it the Public Administration Select Committee—has returned to the subject of ACoBA and will keep returning to it, because the system remains ineffective and fails to command public confidence. The problems it is supposed to address have only escalated over this period. Governments have failed to address our concerns and public trust in the system has continued to decline. To restore public trust, it is crucial to stamp out not only impropriety by senior Ministers and officials, but also the appearance of impropriety. ACoBA, although well intentioned, lacks the resources and structures to achieve that.

I hope the Government will pay attention to this. I do understand that this is a very difficult matter to address. The Committee on Standards in Public Life, I believe, should be having a look at this. As the Government consider the appointment of the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life—I may have a role in that—I hope that it will be made clear to the new Chair that this is an issue that should be looked at. Perhaps the Committee on Standards in Public Life will conclude, in the same way as the Government, that there is no need for any significant change, but I think the matter deserves scrutiny.

One detects a kind of squeamishness in Whitehall among Ministers and senior officials, whom this question directly affects because they will soon, in their careers, be leaving public office and moving to the private sector. One detects that there is a reluctance to confront this issue, perhaps for the worst of reasons, which rather undermines public confidence in the system as it exists today. I am afraid it is an ineffective and poorly trusted regulator, which is probably worse than no regulator at all.

4.5 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): I am pleased to support the report. I commend the Chairman for his excellent speech. I have for a long time been concerned about public confidence in politicians and the state of Government, and it is very important indeed that we get it across that we are, overwhelmingly, honest people, trying to do the right thing by our constituents and by the country to improve everyone’s lives. But there are those who are not.

I am taken back to when I was first elected as a councillor, many years ago—1972 to be precise—and I was challenged outside a public meeting in my ward by a scrap metal merchant. He said, “Look mate, we are all on the fiddle, aren’t we?” I said, “No, actually; I am not on the fiddle.” He said, “No, not you—them others.” I said, “Which others? If you give me their names I shall report them to the chief executive.” He said, “No, not the councillors—the officers.” I said, “That is even worse. If you know names of officers who are ‘on the fiddle’ as you put it, I shall certainly report them to the chief executive.” He walked away in disbelief; he thought I was going to say, “Of course I am on the fiddle, mate. Have you got any backhanders for me?” That is not how things work, but some people suspect that that is how it works.

More recently, a couple of years ago, there were some television stings on Members. One was absolutely astounding. One Member openly said, “Yes, I am for hire, like a taxi.” Another said they would be prepared to work for, I think, £5,000 a day. It was astounding—Members whom I knew. I had no idea that was how they thought.

We are well paid and have good pensions. I believe that our job is to represent the interests of ordinary people, not ourselves, or indeed the interests of business. ACOBA, as the Chairman rightly said, is toothless and feeble. I am a member of the Public Administration Committee. There are those on the Committee who fulminate, almost, at what has been going on. I feel just as strongly. The report moves us forward and the Government must act at some point. I personally believe that the rules should be much stronger and rigorously enforced to ensure that everyone believes that our politics are honest and straight.

4.8 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I shall not be too long on my feet. A lot of the points I wanted to raise have already been covered and I have torn a cartilage in my right knee, so I am feeling the pain as I speak.

In the report there is a quote from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report of 2017, which mirrors closely a comment by its predecessor, the Public Administration Committee from 2012 when it says:

“The regulatory system for scrutinising the post-public employment of former Ministers and civil servants is ineffectual and does not inspire public confidence or respect. Our inquiry has revealed numerous gaps in ACOBA’s monitoring process with insufficient attention paid to the principles that should govern business appointments. The failures of governments in this regard have damaged public trust in politics and public institutions and led to repeated scandals. Consequently, we are recommending major reform.”
Since 2012, nothing seems to have improved. The failure of ACoBA to keep a lid on the revolving doors between Government and industry, including seeing the most senior Ministers take on jobs without waiting for approval, means that a system relying solely on the honour of former Ministers, without sanctions or consequences, is seen as optional and has now failed.

As the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) mentioned, the situation with George Osborne has been particularly worrying. That the former Chancellor of the Exchequer has been taken on as an adviser to the BlackRock Investment Institute on a salary considerably in excess of his previous salary as Chancellor, in a sector that he was responsible for regulating, seems to show little care for even the appearance of propriety among Ministers. That the body that was supposed to be regulating the revolving doors between Government and industry had to hear that he had accepted a high-profile position as editor of the Evening Standard in the news, without him having consulted them or waited for clearance, shows that the system is broken. That the president of BlackRock could tell investors that there is no way of knowing whether Mr Osborne will “draw on (or disclose or use for the benefit of yourself or the organisation to which this advice refers) any privileged information” that he gained from his time in Government shows that this is an absolute mockery.

As the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex said, the ACoBA chair, Baroness Browning, said to the Committee “every bus driver and hairdresser you know” should “apply for any of those jobs. I can tell you factually, not one applied.”

Well, that is not surprising when the essential criteria for such a role include senior-level experience of at least one of the following sectors: the diplomatic service, the military or business. The criteria go on to mention “Understanding of the machinery of government, preferably gained through practical experience at a senior level...Good communications skills...Personal integrity and strength of character”.

The report states: “While the majority of these characteristics are not beyond your average hairdresser or bus driver, the first criteria, namely senior level experience in the Diplomatic Service, Military or business, may restrict applications from outside these sectors.”

Further, it was found that the problems identified in the system are “escalating” with increased numbers of public servants moving between the public and private sectors, with a number of high-profile cases resulting in a decline in public confidence in the system. Research by the High Pay Centre states that between 2000 and 2014, 600 former Ministers and top-level civil servants were appointed to over 1,000 different business roles. Its report raised concerns about the “corporate colonisation” of UK politics. Private Eye’s Richard Brooks told PACAC that “former senior officials and their new employers see the” ACoBA “process as a mere rubber stamp”.

On what scale is this happening? In 2010-11, immediately following the general election, ACoBA advised 42 former Ministers regarding 95 applications and 38 civil servants regarding 63 applications. In 2015-16, immediately after that general election, the equivalent figure was 33 Ministers regarding 123 applications and 36 Crown servants in relation to 110 appointments.

Since 2010, no former Ministers or civil servants have had an application refused by ACoBA—not one, nada, zilch, zero. Private Eye reported that by 2015, outsourcing public services cost the UK Government £120 billion and that despite poor records of delivery, G4S and Serco continue to win favour and contracts because of the revolving door and blurred distinction between employees in private companies and ministerial Departments.

Finally, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who unfortunately cannot be in his seat today, described ACoBA as “nothing but a poodle without teeth or claws, bark or bite...totally and utterly useless”. [Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1567.]

I could not have put it better myself. If he is watching today, we miss him and hate him back. The report recommends only a cost-benefit analysis. I would go further and say that a statutory basis for ACoBA is necessary for its continued existence, otherwise it will rightly be seen entirely as decorative.

4.14 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on his recent knighthood, richly deserved after many years’ service in this place, and on the work of the Committee and the dogged way in which he and his Committee have gone after this particular issue. It is a lesson to all in the House about the value and the strength of Select Committees when they are well led and follow the evidence with robust questioning. I pay tribute to him and his Committee.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his tribute, but may I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan)? We really do owe much of our work to the persistence of our absent friend, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who has always contributed and motivated the Committee on this matter.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for that clarification and the House will have noted it.

The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments is entirely necessary, but, to use the phrase of the moment, not at all fit for purpose. The clue is in the name. The A in ACoBA stands for “advisory” and it is clear that the committee is just that: it has no teeth and if its harshest sanction is to embarrass—well, that is scarcely a sanction at all. I wonder whether, as currently constituted, it is even designed to make a difference with a very narrow remit. As far as I can tell, ACoBA has never actually refused an appointment.

ACoBA is appointed by the Government to provide independent advice to senior Crown servants and to all former Ministers of the UK. Scottish and Welsh Governments on any appointments they wish to take up within two years of leaving public or ministerial office. ACoBA applies the business appointment rules, which are largely procedural and set by the Government.
They have no statutory basis and there are no sanctions for non-compliance. The rules apply for up to two years after leaving office and they are applied with inconsistency.

It is a clear failure of ACOBA that it cannot adequately distinguish between different types of post-ministerial appointment, for example paid as opposed to unpaid work. One former senior civil servant recounted to me the story of when they left the civil service. They took a position on the board of trustees of a community group. It took months upon months for this voluntary position to be approved. Part of the delay was down to due diligence, because the trust was a charity. If charities and the Charity Commission can undertake due diligence and prevent an appointment pending such checks, why can ACOBA not do that?

Meanwhile, as we have heard, the former Chancellor George Osborne can take a job with BlackRock in the City of London and not even tell ACOBA that he was taking a job editing the London Evening Standard. I understand the same applies to the former head of GCHQ, Robert Hannigan, who was appointed to the European advisory board for a new US cyber-security firm, BlueteamGlobal, and did not even tell ACOBA. Because it is set up as an advisory and non-statutory committee, ACOBA finds enforcement difficult. I suspect that this is the reason it does not attempt to enforce. Indeed, it may be the reason it was set up in this way in the first place.

In addition to ACOBA's toothlessness, there are further problems, for example with conflicts of interest. There are numerous, multiple examples of members of the committee declaring interests in firms to which the applicants were being appointed, but not recusing themselves from those cases. This included Mary Jo Jacobi, who has financial interests in BP but did not recuse herself from Vernon Gibson's application, and John Wood, who has interests in BT, did not recuse himself from Keith Bristow's commission with them.

ACOBA was also criticised by the former Public Administration Committee for having an “establishment” make-up—the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex raised this point. ACOBA is chaired by a Baroness and former Conservative Minister, who also works as a consultant for a company that looks very much like a lobbying firm. Other members of the committee include two Lords, a knight, a former general secretary of the First Division Association, lawyers and former senior civil service grandees. I go back to the evidence cited by the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee about bus drivers or hairdressers. As he says, there seems to be no sight of them.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making the point made by the Chair and other colleagues. Putting people on ACOBA who look like members of the establishment, honest though they may be, just reinforces the image among the public of the establishment looking after itself, instead of having ordinary people, maybe bus drivers and hairdressers, who are remote from the establishment on the committee.

Christian Matheson: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, but it is not simply about image. It is about having a different perspective. It is about approaching the question of an appointment from a different point of view, so that somebody from the outside, a bus driver or a hairdresser, can say, “Look, this really doesn’t look right from where I am sitting.” He makes an extremely good point, but the issue is about more than how it looks.

We welcome much of the report, including its finding that the problem of conflicts of interest “has escalated, with increased numbers of public servants moving between the public and private sectors, and a number of very high profile cases resulting in declining public confidence in a system that was set up to command trust by mitigating any breaches of the Rules.”

It also states:

“The regulatory system for scrutinising the post public employment of former Ministers and civil servants is ineffectual and does not inspire public confidence or respect.”

It refers to “numerous gaps in ACoBA’s monitoring process with insufficient attention paid to the principles that should govern business appointments.”

The report has several clear and pretty strong recommendations for ACOBA, including much greater transparency of data published about decisions, an amendment to the Ministerial Code, and the publication of applications on receipt and not after the fact. It also proposes the disclosure of full information about ACOBA’s procedures for assessing applications and the reasons for its judgments.

Labour Members welcome the report as a starting point for the reform of ACOBA, but I disagree with the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, who said—although I may have misunderstood him—that reform might be quite difficult. I am not sure that it would be if enough attention were given to it, and as long as the political will was there, although I concede that he, rather than me, is the one who has done all the studying of the detail.

We have been calling for the reform of ACOBA since 2011. Whether the issue is the lack of diversity of its members, their own conflicts of interest, or indeed the very rules by which they work—or, indeed, do not work—it cannot continue to exist as a fig leaf that fails even in that role of concealing the revolving door. It should be entirely reconstituted, with clearer terms of reference and stronger powers to delay or block appointments that are not appropriate. By failing to act, or being unable to act, ACOBA highlights the fact that the current arrangements are simply not working, and it must be reformed.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I thank all the Members who have spoken today. I am, obviously, particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), and, through him, I thank his Committee for its examination of this issue over time. Obviously, the Government welcome the opportunity to respond formally to its most recent report on this subject. That report stands. I trust that Members have had a chance to read it in detail today. I have also been able to listen to the points that have been made during the debate. Let me now set out how the Government see ACoBA, and, in doing so, try to address some of those points.

ACoBA fulfils a specific remit: to supply independent, impartial advice on the business appointment rules to former Ministers and civil servants on proposed new
appointments of people who have left Government service. It supplies its advice directly to former Ministers and, in the case of civil servants, to either the Prime Minister or the relevant permanent secretary. It remains the Government’s view that it fulfils its remit effectively, efficiently and with professionalism. It comprises nine very knowledgeable individuals, independent of Government, who bring with them a wealth of experience from the public, private and third sectors.

The business appointment rules system itself is a set of principles which seeks to ensure that, when a former Minister or civil servant takes up an outside appointment, there is no justified public concern about that appointment. We do think, though, that people have a right to earn a living after leaving Government, perhaps in areas in which they have established expertise. When applying the rules, the system should strike a balance, ensuring that there is public confidence, but also ensuring that the conditions do not amount to an unlawful or unenforceable restraint of trade.

Kelvin Hopkins: It is fair enough that, when people leave the House, or leave Government jobs, they should be able to earn a living, but not necessarily in the area in which they previously worked, from which they could benefit through their inside knowledge, or in which they might even have influenced policy in the expectation of a subsequent reward. That is what is wrong. If someone who was in the MOD then gets a job as a schoolteacher, that is not a problem; if they get a job ordering supplies for the military, that is a different matter.

Chloe Smith: I think that the hon. Gentleman and I are in agreement, because that is the guiding principle of this structure. There should be able to be public confidence that abuses are not occurring. There was a clue, I think, in his choice of words. He may have involuntarily used the words “not necessarily”, but there is something rather important in that. We have a flexible system that means that there is the ability to make a decision not necessarily in one fashion or another. That is one of the advantages of having a non-statutory body —it can be a little more flexible, in a way that is different from something that is encased in legislation, where the words “necessarily this” or “necessarily that” may apply.

Kelvin Hopkins: I hope that the hon. Lady is not reading too much into my words. In my short speech, I said that I wanted strong rules, rigidly enforced. That is the way it should be. There should be an entire separation between what a Minister does in government and what they do after they leave Parliament.

Chloe Smith: I hear and respect the hon. Gentleman’s view and I am grateful to him for taking the trouble to repeat it.

One of the other principles at stake is that we do not want to deter talented people from entering government service. I suspect that the Committee also recognised that principle, quite rightly. In the Government’s view, that could result from having an over-rigid system that could prevent or restrict people from returning to the sectors in which their expertise lies appropriately following a period of public service. Now, more than ever, with some major challenges in view for the public sector and for the civil service, we need to be able to attract the best skills and talent and to benefit from those who have capabilities and experience from outside the civil service—let us not forget this argument works two ways.

In order to deliver for the public and for taxpayers in the way in which they expect of their civil service, we need to be able to maintain a confident, professional and expert service when we are looking at such important and critical matters in the public sector.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend knows that the PASC report of 2012 recommended a statutory scheme. In this later report, having listened to the Government’s objections about the cost-effectiveness of a statutory scheme, we invited the Government to produce a cost-benefit analysis, which indeed even the chair of ACoBA said would be a good idea. However, the Government have declined to produce even a cost-benefit analysis of having statutory rules, or enforceable rules of some kind. Will she revisit that recommendation and look at the question of a cost-benefit analysis? We are constantly told that rules would have a very negative effect on the public sector, but there is no evidence to support what she is claiming—although I understand that there is a perfectly legitimate concern.

Chloe Smith: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for that intervention. He gives me the opportunity to note that these arguments have been put back and forth a number of times over the years. It is my great pleasure to come to the House today and take up those arguments. However, it is still the Government’s case that a statutory system is not the right way forward. That is a matter of principle as much as of practicality, for the reasons I have set out. We do not therefore think it is right to go ahead and do a cost-benefit analysis, which, in itself, would take time and money, for something that, in principle, we are not convinced of the case for. It is a question of principle and practicality.

We need to be able to attract capable people from a range of backgrounds, and I reiterate the commitment to being able to recruit fully externally to do that. It is therefore important to have an interchange of skills and experience between the public sector and elsewhere. That is good for our national life. It is also a matter of fairness to individuals who will wish to continue their careers in various ways. We need to strike that balance. As I said, we remain of the view that a statutory system with enforcement powers but without the flexibility of the current arrangements to take account of the particular circumstances of individual cases would not be beneficial. As I have just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex, we do not consider carrying out that cost-benefit analysis on the introduction of such a system to be a good use of public money at this time.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend is being very patient, but unfortunately for her she has a lot of time. If she is going to refuse a cost-benefit analysis, will she at least accept this? ACoBA seems to be very preoccupied by what candidates might do after they have left the public sector in the context of their employers, and it often puts a lobbying ban on the person moving into the private sector. What regard should ACoBA have for the fact that the lobbying has already probably taken place and the granting of employment is just the implicit reward for having been lobbied when the candidate was working in the public sector? No regard seems to be paid to that potential conflict of interest in the way the ACoBA rules are applied.
Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which is, I suppose, at the other end of the process. Although it is ACoBA’s remit to look at the exit end of the process, the entry end is also bound around with codes of conduct—the ministerial code and the codes of conduct expected of civil servants. Crucial to those are of course the principles of public life. While we are on the subject of principles that govern what we are talking about here, I should say that we expect a high degree of principles and of ethical behaviour from anybody who comes in to work for the public sector—that is the least that both their employer and the taxpayer expect. However, I wonder whether it would ever be feasible to systematise that and have someone checking every dot on the i and cross on the t of how that could be done. That is a slightly different part of the process from the one we would be looking to ACoBA to deal with.

I did want to talk about transparency, because it is one way in which we can also look to gain accountability in the area of appointments after public service. ACoBA publishes a considerable amount of information on the applications it receives, and Departments do the same where it is their responsibility to do so. That advice is published online, in full, once an appointment is taken up, and Departments publish summary information regarding civil servants’ applications on a quarterly basis. What those methods do is very important. They provide a reputational check and balance. Hypothetically speaking, if I were a future employer of somebody and I felt they had not been honest about something which I could very easily scrutinise, I might think twice about employing them. We have a clear and open system, and it has a very human point at its heart. The Government believe that is helpful and sufficient to ensure that the public have the information they need for transparency and accountability purposes.

We have noted in our responses to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s previous reports on this issue that there are certain areas where the current system may be tightened, and I would like to go into those now in order to outline to Committee members and others who are here this afternoon the changes we have made. First, the ministerial code is clear that Ministers of the Crown are expected to behave in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety. The code contains an explicit prohibition on former Ministers from lobbying Government for two years following their departure from office, and they must also seek advice from ACoBA about any outside appointments and abide by that advice. To reinforce that requirement, the most recent version of the code appends a full version of the rules and includes new wording to make it clear that new appointments should not be taken up or announced until ACoBA has had the opportunity to provide its advice. Hon. Members will find that important in the context of examples they have given this afternoon.

In addition, the Minister for the Cabinet Office has recently written to ministerial colleagues reminding them of the importance of the business appointment rules in maintaining public confidence in the integrity of our public servants. We have also taken steps to improve awareness of our compliance with the rules at departmental level and to improve Departments’ monitoring of compliance issues. These actions are largely in response to recommendations made by my hon. Friend’s Select Committee in its latest report on this issue, and I thank him and the Committee for their continued interest. I particularly wanted to be able to set out today how we have made those changes and the way in which they take the issue forward.

The Cabinet Office has also recently issued updated guidance to Departments on administering the rules on working with ACoBA. This guidance includes a number of new points, including increasing clarity on how the rules apply to civil servants on career breaks, ensuring that all applications from former permanent secretaries are countersigned by the Cabinet Secretary and encouraging Departments to consider an individual’s compliance with the business appointment rules in the future, should they wish to return to Government service. [Interruption.]

Dangerously, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am now going to pause for a glass of water. I await a heavyweight intervention from the Chair of the Select Committee. However, none is forthcoming. [Interruption.] I shall now complete my remarks, so that the House can move on to the important matters that await it in the next debate.

In addition, if a former Minister or senior civil servant is nominated for an honour, ACoBA will be consulted on an individual’s compliance with the business appointment rules as part of the honours and appointments secretariat’s existing vetting process. Finally, the chief executive of the civil service and the Government lead non-executive have written to the chairs of each of the departmental audit and risk committees, requiring them to monitor on a quarterly basis a Department’s performance on ensuring compliance with the business appointment rules. In our view, the amendments that I have listed for the House today, which will also be incorporated into the civil service management code in due course, will help to tighten and strengthen the processes that underpin the subject of today’s debate. They will also raise awareness and improve compliance with the rules.

In summary—[Interruption.] All I need is for some scenery to begin to collapse behind me; then I would have had the perfect afternoon in the Chamber. In summary, in the Government’s view, ACoBA’s primary role is, and should remain, to provide independent advice on the application of the business appointment rules on outside appointments to Ministers and the most senior Crown servants after they leave office. The Government’s view remains that the current rules strike the right balance between preventing conflicts of interest and recognising the necessary freedom of individuals to earn a living without unreasonable hindrance after they leave public service.

4.37 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am grateful for the attention that my hon. Friend has given this matter. I know that it is a matter over which to agonise, because it contains a lot of dilemmas. She has put forward extremely powerfully all the countervailing points about how to attract people into the public service and how not to punish them in the afterlife for giving up the salary and perks of the private sector to work in the public service, and so on.

The Minister has also talked a lot about processes and transparency, and I suggest that there is one process that would really open this up. That process would involve applications being published at the outset. I know that this is an advisory committee and that people
go there for advice, but it really is ridiculous that they can
go there on a fishing expedition. The advisory
committee could tell someone that they could not possibly
take a certain job because of what might happen, but
nothing would ever appear in the public domain to
indicate that that person had no moral compass of their
own. Let them go and take advice from a lawyer about
how the rules would be applied, but once they have
applied to ACoBA, let it be transparent that they have
applied. Let us find out what sort of person they are
and whether they are applying for a job in a way that
should not be allowed.

My second point is more about principles. In
paragraph 105 of our report, we recommend a change
to the civil service code, which should also be made to
the ministerial code. Our recommendation is quite simple,
and it is that these words should be included:

“You must: take decisions in the public interest alone; never
allow yourself to be influenced in contracting, procurement,
regulation or the provision of policy advice, by your career
expectations or prospects if you leave the public service; always
report to your line managers any offers of jobs or other rewards,
or any informal suggestions of such rewards, that may have, or be
reasonably seen to have a bearing on your role as a public servant;
take particular care in your relations with former colleagues who
may seek to influence your decisions as a public servant. You
must not: take up any post outside the public service in business
or [commercial] organisations operating in areas where you have
been directly responsible in the previous [currently] two years for
any form of contracting, procurement or regulation.”

We believe that that would provide a framework for
people to think about what they are doing in the public
service and at least some basis for discussion about how
we expect people to behave. Sadly, leaving a Government
Department, whether as a Minister, official or member
of the armed forces, and, in time, finding oneself in
related work in the private sector, has become something
of a way of life. It is the new normal.

Unless we can find a way of providing reassurance
about such behaviour, we will finish up with a statutory
system in the end. I invite the Minister to reconsider
that particular recommendation. I appreciate the
opportunity to raise these matters this afternoon. They
will not go away, I am afraid—they will be back, unless
the Government take action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Thirteenth Report of the
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee,
HC 252, Managing Ministers’ and officials’ conflicts of interest:
time for clearer values, principles and action, on the role and
effectiveness of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments
(ACoBA); notes that ACoBA regulates applications for business
appointments by former Ministers and civil servants who have
recently left the public sector; believes that ACoBA is an ineffectual
regulator which fails to inspire public confidence or respect;
expresses concern that the Committee’s inquiry revealed numerous
gaps in ACoBA’s monitoring process with insufficient attention
paid to the principles that should govern business appointments;
agrees that failures of consecutive governments to address ACoBA’s
deficiencies have damaged public trust in politics and public
institutions and led to repeated scandals; calls on the Government
to bring forward major reform by introducing a principles-based
system to ensure that individuals act with integrity and behave
according to those principles; and further calls on the Government
to fund independent checks by ACoBA across all Government
departments and executive agencies to reinforce those principles.

PETITION

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

4.41 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I
would be the first to say that Ealing has some great
schools; I know that as I am a product of them myself, I
use them as a mum, and I am the sort of MP who goes
to assemblies. I will go to my first school fête on
Saturday—at Montpelier School, my old primary.

However, I also recognise that the formal school system is not for everyone, and that is what this petition
is about. It has been spearheaded by Jackie Fahy of
Chiswick and is backed by people from all over my
constituency—the Freely family of Ealing, the Carberry
family of Acton, Elizabeth Howard, Sarah Bignell
and loads of other people. Their issue is about safeguards
for people who home-educate their kids and the need
for there not to be overbearing regulation. I understand
that this is the first such petition of hundreds that have
been received by Members on both sides of the House; I
just seem to have been the first to have got here.

The petition states:
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidelines and the
consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable
complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating
parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should
include.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that the “Home Education - Call for Evidence
and revised DfE guidance” has been written following
significant consultation with local authorities and no
consultation whatsoever with the home education community;
further that the consultation is consequently for little
more than show as an intention to implement the content
has already been stated; further that it seeks to encourage
local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the
GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible
means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by
their local authority, where many of those authorities
already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Government to withdraw the draft
guidelines and the consultation, until it has put in place
an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further
has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with
Local Authorities, what the contents should include.
And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Armed Forces Veterans

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

4.43 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I relish this opportunity to raise this important issue, which is hugely significant—not only to my constituents in North Devon, but across the country. It is, of course, extremely significant at the moment, during the lead-up to Armed Forces Day on Saturday.

It is worth saying, perhaps for the benefit of those watching these proceedings from outside, that no inference should be drawn from the, sadly, rather small number of colleagues in the House today. That is absolutely not a reflection of the extraordinarily high regard in which all Members view members of the armed forces and veterans; it is purely, I am afraid, a product of the parliamentary timetable and the fact that many colleagues will now be on their way to their constituencies to take part in events for Armed Forces Day this weekend.

I start on a personal note by sharing my own grandfather’s story. He fought in the great war and enrolled at the start of the conflict. He told the Army that he was born in 1895. When he passed away 60 years later, we discovered the truth: he had lied about his age. He was so eager to serve King and country that he had signed up as a 15-year-old boy.

One hundred years after the end of the first world war, I am now the proud custodian of my grandfather’s service medals and ribbons, but I am ashamed to say that we know nothing else of his part in the conflict. Like many of his generation, he never talked about it. He was alive until I was 10 years old, but I do not recall having a single conversation with him about his part in the war—that is just the way it was for that generation.

How times have changed, and rightly so. Today we are far more aware of the service of our armed forces veterans. We understand much better the challenges they face, and we openly acknowledge the debt of gratitude we owe them, but with that greater understanding comes difficult questions—questions about whether society and the state are doing enough to support our veterans and to provide them with the assistance they need and deserve. That is the focus of my thoughts today.

There are around 2.5 million veterans in the UK. It depends on how we count, but that is the best figure. My county of Devon has the highest number of veterans as a proportion of its population of any county in the UK. We have some 100,000 veterans living in Devon. Many of them are in my constituency of North Devon. Many of them are in my constituency of North Devon, where of course we have a very proud historical connection with the military. It is the home of Royal Marines Base Chivenor, which my right hon. Friend the Minister visited earlier this year. Until recently, we also had an Army base at Fremington. There is also a military establishment at Instow.

North Devon is also home to veterans who have served in many military establishments across Devon and, indeed, the rest of the south-west. It has a proud historical connection with the armed services, so I take a particular interest in all these matters.

The centrepiece of our country’s contract with our armed services veterans is the armed forces covenant, which is a promise by the nation that those who serve or have served, and their families, will be treated fairly and suffer no disadvantage. It also allows for special consideration, especially and most importantly where a veteran has been injured or a family bereaved.

The covenant has achieved a great deal since its inception in 2011. It is now embedded in the NHS constitution, and all local authorities in Great Britain, as well as more than 2,500 other organisations and businesses, are now signed up to its principles, but there is always more we can do to support our veterans. I am encouraged by the fact that this Government have gone further and established the ministerial covenant and veterans board better to co-ordinate central Government’s approach to our service personnel and to veterans and their families. Local delivery is supported by the covenant fund of £10 million a year in perpetuity, which funds projects across the UK.

That is all to be welcomed, but I have mentioned that there are difficult questions and there are challenges, and these cannot be ignored because, for some of our veterans, those disadvantages are foremost. I will focus on these issues, but chief among them is mental health.

In Devon it is estimated that almost one in six of our veterans has complex mental health needs, which is an issue that will no doubt grow in importance in the coming years. Over the next decade or so the veterans population will experience a dramatic shift from the second world war cohort of largely conscripted former service personnel to a younger cohort of professional servicemen and women who fought in very different conflicts and therefore face very different challenges. They fought in conflicts or took part in peacekeeping duties in theatres such as Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falkland Islands, the Balkan countries and many, many more.

Mental ill health, often presenting itself in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, is in many cases an invisible condition. Not only does the state need to take greater notice, but society needs to change its attitude, too. That is something in which I take a particular interest, ranging across not just our former armed forces personnel but many others who are living with mental ill health.

I therefore welcome the Defence Secretary’s recent pledge to increase funding for armed forces mental health services to £220 million over the next decade, and of course, as we heard recently, NHS budgets across the board are increasing, which is a start, but we must ensure that a significant chunk of that new money is targeted at those who need help with mental health conditions. Our growing understanding of the long-term impacts of active service and the changing nature of our veteran communities means we should look to go further, too.

To that end, I am encouraged by the establishment of the veterans strategy, which will look to address the changing needs of our armed services personnel and improve mental health support. I very much look forward to its publication in November, and I am sure the Minister will talk more about that in his remarks.

We must also acknowledge the excellent work being undertaken by many charities, voluntary bodies and third sector organisations. It is invidious to just pull out a couple for mention as there are many and I wish to acknowledge all of them, but I mention in particular the charities Combat Stress and the Royal Foundation...
of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, which works to support the “access pathway” into the NHS for veterans suffering from mental health problems. They are all doing very worthwhile work.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As we are talking about the contribution of charities, I would like to bring to the hon. Gentleman’s attention the Lee Rigby Foundation, which is run by the parents of that murdered fusilier, who lived in my constituency. They have opened up a home for respite and retreat for injured soldiers and their families, and are also hoping to open a veterans lodge. They rely solely on fundraising.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that case; it is another fine example of a charity that is doing fantastic work in this regard.

The work done by such organisations, many of which we have not mentioned, is vital not least because research carried out by the Royal British Legion has found that social isolation and loneliness are now widely experienced among our veteran community, and that leads further to mental health problems. More attention must be given to the unique experiences of our armed forces community; their mobile lifestyle and self-reliant culture and a stigma about speaking out or seeking help can all lead to isolation, leaving veterans unable to seek support for what could be, or develop into, a serious mental health condition.

I recognise that much of the responsibility for our veterans lies with local authorities and in our local communities, and I am pleased that every local authority in Great Britain, including in my area North Devon District Council and Devon County Council, has now signed the armed forces covenant. But merely signing up to the covenant is not enough. Sadly, there remains wide variation in the implementation of the covenant’s pledges; it is to some extent a postcode lottery—that was the phrase used by one veteran who contacted me in the last few hours, having seen the social media publicity around this Adjournment debate. That veteran is correct.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Peter Heaton-Jones: I will of course give way to a fellow Devon MP.

Luke Pollard: I thank a fellow west country MP for giving way.

There are places like Plymouth and Portsmouth, and clearly north Devon as well, that are doing so much to embed the covenant in all aspects of the public services, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that this must not be a document that gathers dust on a local council’s or local business’s bookshelf; it needs to be lived and breathed and implemented every single day to make it real?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment, and that is precisely the point I am seeking to come on to. Signing up to the covenant is not enough; there needs to be active participation by those who sign on the dotted line.

Another difficulty is that a lack of familiarity with the services available often prevents some veterans and their families from seeking the help and support that they need. That is why I am delighted that Devon County Council has established a website—a one-stop shop—that serves as an online directory of services and support for veterans and their families. The Devon Forces Family website hosts dedicated information in a single place, making it quick and easy for all those connected with our armed forces to access the services and assistance they need. In particular, websites such as Devon Forces Family can help veterans and their families to find suitable housing, and therefore complement central Government policy.

The Government are helping forces families to get on the property ladder by, for example, making loans totalling £163 million to help more than 10,000 forces personnel to get on or stay on the property ladder. Veterans need to be afforded similar opportunities, and I hope that a way can be found to ensure that that can happen. Communication is key and co-operation across different levels of Government is essential. For those seeking social housing, local authorities must ensure that changes to the law, which have been designed to ensure that veterans with urgent housing needs are prioritised, are fairly and properly implemented in their area. We must be sure that all statutory bodies that are responsible for delivering on those changes are doing so, and that they are making sure that veterans receive the practical help that they need, targeted to them in a timely and efficient manner.

When we think about support for our armed forces veterans, there is a third aspect. I say at the outset that I take close notice of the Standing Orders as they relate to matters that are sub judice. It is perhaps the elephant in the room: the issue of historical prosecutions. The issue has been and is being considered elsewhere more widely, so I shall not comment on individual cases, except to say that I am taking an extremely close interest in one in my own constituency. It is a matter that is, understandably, causing concern to veterans in my constituency and elsewhere. Indeed, I have had a great deal of correspondence from veterans, and I met a number of them in my constituency surgery recently to discuss the issue. I understand their concerns.

Let me pose this question: do we really want our veterans to have to worry about hearing a knock on the door and being hauled before a court to be held to account today’s standards for alleged offences that happened more than 20, 30 or even 40 years ago—incidents that happened when young servicemen, sometimes only teenagers themselves, were facing threats the likes of which most of us can only imagine? I add my voice to the growing support for a statute of limitations, which would see soldiers exempted from prosecutions after 10 years had passed. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing Monday’s Adjournment debate on the issue, which many of us stayed late to hear.

Let me be clear: that is not to say that these sorts of cases should be swept under the carpet and not dealt with at all. I recognise that closure is extremely important. I very much welcome the Northern Ireland Office consultation, which is currently seeking views on how better to address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past. That consultation closes on 10 September; I urge veterans and interested parties to take part and have their voice heard.

For now, as we approach Armed Forces Day, I wish to achieve a number of things, and I am sure that the Government have the same ambition. Let us ensure that
[Peter Heaton-Jones]

we continue to do all we can to provide the help and support that our veterans need. As a Government, let us leave no stone unturned when it comes to ensuring that we are doing all we can. It is not just about money and resources; it is about using those resources more smartly by making information more widely available, making sure that we have joined-up thinking across all the statutory bodies and third sector organisations that work with veterans, and recognising in the first place the growing challenge that veterans face, particularly when it comes to their mental health.

Let us acknowledge and support the outstanding work that is being done, and let us do what my grandfather and I never had the chance to do: let us talk with pride about the service of our veterans, and in doing so recognise that we owe them all the help and support that they require, as well as a huge debt of gratitude, not only on Armed Forces day but on every day of the year—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I must interrupt the hon. Gentleman even though he is just on his peroration, because we have to move the 5 o’clock motion again.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Madam Deputy Speaker: I hope the hon. Gentleman Gentleman can conclude his peroration in the way that he was doing.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I feel that I have perorated, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): May I begin with a declaration of interest as a colonel in the reserves?

As is customary on these occasions, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) on securing this important Adjournment debate. May I thank him also for an absolutely delightful and educational visit to Chivenor? It was a pleasure to go down there to see the Marines and the activities that are going on and also to understand what is happening as we rationalise the real estate of the armed forces. I am grateful for his interest in that matter. I am also thankful that he has drawn the House’s attention to this important issue of mental health and to the support for veterans, too.

My hon. Friend mentioned his grandfather. He tells a tale of a 15-year-old who wanted to serve King and country and to lie on the sign-up sheets. That was repeated across the country. Massive tribute should be paid to the dedication, the loyalty, the commitment and the bravery of people stepping out into the unknown, unsure of what to do, but knowing also that it was the right thing to do. I pay huge tribute to his grandfather. I know that his action was repeated up and down the country.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Armed Forces Day. This debate is absolutely timely, as we celebrate, mark and reflect on the role that the armed forces play in our society. The bond between our armed forces and society is critical. We recruit from society. That is our gene pool, and it is where we want to attract people from, so that we have an armed force by consent of the nation. Therefore, that relationship that we have is absolutely pivotal if we want to keep the professionalism of our armed forces, which are revered and respected across the world.

I am pleased to say that the Secretary of State will be in Llandudno in north Wales, leading the focal point of Armed Forces Day celebrations, which will be repeated up and down the country as we pay our tributes. I see the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is nodding. Last year, I went to the Armed Forces Day celebrations in his constituency, and they were fantastic.

My hon. Friend also mentioned that these celebrations mark the end of the second world war; they also mark the 100th anniversary of the RAF, so we have another opportunity this weekend to say thanks to those in uniform.

Interestingly, Northern Ireland celebrates its Armed Forces Day a week earlier. Last weekend, I was in Coleraine in Northern Ireland. Having served there myself, may I just say what a pleasure it was to be able to see the bands, the infanteers and those in uniform marching down the high street of Coleraine with the absolute support of the public? It was absolutely gratifying to see that because when I served in Northern Ireland, we could not even move from one place to another unless we were on patrol in uniform. Again, it is an illustration of that important bond between society and our armed forces.

My hon. Friend raises this matter of support for veterans with a focus on mental health and other issues. I was pleased to give evidence this Tuesday at the Defence Committee’s evidence session on armed forces veterans and mental health. This morning, I had the opportunity to speak at the Queen Elizabeth conference centre to the Forces in Mind Trust. This is an important body that helps to provide accurate data on exactly what is going on with our veterans and our armed forces. My hon. Friend mentioned that there are 2.5 million veterans. The profile of our veterans community is likely to change over the next 10 years. It will decrease by about 1 million because we will very sadly lose those who fought in the second world war.

As we are talking about the honesty and clarity of the data we need, I want to take the opportunity to emphasise up front that life in the armed forces is a rewarding and fantastic experience. The vast majority of personnel serve well, transition well and leave well. The nation has benefited from their service, and continues to benefit from their service once they have packed up their uniform and slid it across to the quartermaster that final time. We benefit because of the unique set of skills that people learn in the armed forces: leadership, teamwork, grit, tenacity, determination and a bit of attitude. Those are skillsets that any employer would want.

The majority of veterans transition back into society without a problem at all. Some 90% of people who have gone through our transition programmes are back in education or employment within six months of leaving
the armed forces. When we have debates, it is therefore important that we emphasise this point and try to remove the negative myths about our armed forces that still abound.

One of those myths is that people who serve somehow come out damaged. I am afraid that people have the perception that if someone is wearing a uniform or did wear the uniform, they will somehow be damaged. Lord Ashcroft’s helpful report confirmed that that is absolutely not the case, as everyone who is close to the armed forces knows. If these myths perpetuate and we do not put the challenges in perspective, it can affect the reputation of the whole of the armed forces, it can affect employers who might think of recruiting somebody who was in the armed forces and it gives false perceptions of the experience. Veterans are no more likely to commit suicide, to have post-traumatic stress disorder or to have mental health issues than people in the general population.

That said, we are not complacent. We recognise that there are those who experience difficulties and need help, and we must be there to provide that help. We have brought forward the armed forces covenant to ensure that responsibility, which often goes way beyond the Ministry of Defence into other Government Departments. We want to ensure that those responsible are actually doing the things that they have to do in this regard.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Minister is making an excellent contribution. When I visited Community Awareness Programme in my constituency, people told me about the large number of homeless veterans coming through their doors. The Minister is making a point about the liaison with local authorities and homelessness charities to provide specialist support to veterans who may have mental health needs that have not been addressed. That is very important, as such support can enable them to hold down a home, rebuild their families and enter civvy street again with dignity.

Mr Ellwood: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the charity she mentioned. She makes a valid point, and I will come to the issue of homelessness in a second.

I stress that it is important to treat the issue of mental health with due concern, but we must also put it into perspective when we look at wider society. The issue has stayed in the shadows not just in the armed forces, but across society; there has been a stigma surrounding mental health, and it has become secondary to physical injuries. Yet, we need to recognise that a third of us are likely to be affected by mental health issues at some point in our lives.

If these early mental health issues are not challenged and are left unaddressed, they can effect a downwards spiral that reduces confidence, has an impact on employment, destroys relationships, feeds loneliness and, in extreme cases, leads to homelessness and suicide. That is why we are undertaking a comprehensive overhaul of how we deal with mental health. We launched a new mental health strategy last year that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing—we now speak of it as mental fitness—to ensure that it is on a par with physical fitness. We need to ensure that we prevent people from experiencing the effects of mental health issues to begin with, but also that if they are affected, there is good detection, so that we can recognise and analyse it. With detection comes treatment, and following treatment comes recovery.

We need to remove the stigma. We need to change the culture not just in society but in the armed forces, so that it is okay for someone to put their hand up and say that they are suffering from something, or for someone to point out that a friend, spouse and so on has an issue.

Those are the changes we are introducing, to ensure that every captain of a ship, every platoon commander and every individual is aware that it is okay to step forward and that help is available. I am really pleased that the Secretary of State is passionate about that. One of the first things he did in his role was to introduce a 24/7 helpline working with Combat Stress, to ensure that there is a number to call, with professional help on the other end of the line. That now applies to those in the armed forces and veterans.

We have introduced a wave of measures for veterans. My hon. Friend covered them articulately, but I will touch on them briefly. First, the veterans gateway provides online access to a variety of veterans charities. I join him in paying a huge tribute to the incredible work that more than 400 military-facing charities do to provide those serving in our armed forces and those who have retired with the necessary support. However, if someone is homeless or unemployed, which charity do they turn to? It is important that there is a simple, single online gateway—there is also a telephone line—that gives advice and directs people to the necessary support.

My hon. Friend touched on the veterans board. It is imperative that we co-ordinate the work of Government Departments—whether it is the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education or the Department for Work and Pensions—and the devolved Administrations, because they all have a responsibility. Local government is also critical, and that is where we need to do more work. As has been mentioned, there are fine authorities such as those in Portsmouth and Plymouth that are familiar with the armed forces because they have military assets in their neighbourhood. We need to ensure that every local authority in the country recognises its obligations to the covenant and has an armed forces champion—one senior director who does not necessarily do the work up front but directs all aspects of work to ensure that support is available for veterans. That is new, and we need to work on it.

My hon. Friend touched on the veterans strategy and invited me to say a bit more about it. It will be launched in November and, again, is an initiative of the Defence Secretary. It focuses on four themes: first, looking at perceptions and trying to remove the myths surrounding the challenges that we face; secondly, improving co-ordination between the support that is out there; thirdly, offering a cultural shift in our attitudes towards veterans; and finally, there will be studies on specific areas, including mental health and homelessness, which we know are bigger issues that we need to pay more attention to.

Let me be the first to recognise that while we have done significant work and have some incredible projects coming through, there is an awful lot more to do to sharpen the practical impact of the covenant and ensure that we do our best to provide support for our brave veterans. We are immensely proud of our armed forces, given what they do for the nation. Our commitment to them must go beyond equipping and training them well as they serve, to supporting them after they leave.
In society, not just in defence, as we become more comfortable talking about and understanding mental health, everyone can play their part.

In conclusion, as we approach Armed Forces Day, I once again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important Adjournment debate. Let us further encourage people to think differently about our ex-service personnel. Whether as former soldiers, sailors or air personnel, reservists or MPs representing our proud and patriotic constituents, we all have a role in making this happen. We all know what our veterans have done in the past for our country, but we also know that they still have lots to give our nation in the future. We need to make sure that we put our considerable energies together to get that message out there.

Question put and agreed to.

5.14 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 18 June 2018

[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]

House of Lords: Abolition

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 209433 relating to a referendum on the abolition of the House of Lords.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. As I normally do, I will read the text of the petition for the Official Report:

“Give the electorate a referendum on the abolition of the House of Lords. The House of Lords is a place of patronage where unelected and unaccountable individuals hold a disproportionate amount of influence and power which can be used to frustrate the elected representatives of the people.”

As of a couple of hours ago, 169,215 people had signed the petition. The timing of the debate is apt because at the other end of Parliament, the Lords are currently exercising an incredible amount of influence and power over the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as they debate the amendments that have been rejected by this place. We will see what comes back to us later.

I congratulate the petitioner, Rob McBride, who is in the Gallery today with his wife. I just had a snatched conversation with him—I hope to catch up with him after the debate—about what motivated him to start the petition. I was told it was purely the argument, applicable before the EU withdrawal Bill came to the Lords, that in this day and age there is no place for appointed members of a legislative body. I hope to talk about the options, and about the discussions that we have had, that the Lords themselves have had, and that I have had with a number of university and school students regarding the issues and practicalities of Lords reform.

I suspect that many of the 169,000 people who followed Rob’s lead and signed the petition were specifically motivated by the Lords’ consideration of the EU withdrawal Bill, because many signatures came quickly after it. I suspect that a lot of people were concerned about how the Lords had started to overstep their remit—a view I share. I believe that some of the amendments to the Bill sent to the Commons, such as those relating to the European economic area and the customs union, were not in the scope of the original Bill; such matters are properly considered in other legislation, not least the Trade Bill, which is coming before us again in a few weeks’ time. However, considering and voting on provisions such as so-called Henry VIII clauses is well within the Lords’ remit. That may be uncomfortable for the Government and for Members who, like me, voted to leave the EU and want to get on with it, but the House of Lords exists not for my comfort or for the Government’s, but to scrutinise legislation and to return it to the Commons, hopefully in a better state.

That the House of Lords has overstepped the mark in throwing back certain amendments is evidenced by some of the comments made during the debate. Lord Bilimoria said, when considering amendment 49, that “Thanks to this amendment, Parliament would have the ability to stop the train crash that is Brexit.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 April 2018; Vol. 790, c. 1854.]

It is not appropriate for the upper House to thwart the will of the people and to get us to consider what are effectively wrecking amendments to a Bill that was clearly in our manifesto and that we need to get passed in a timely fashion if we are to leave the EU in an orderly way. Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb said in the same debate that she had intended to vote for an amendment, but the speeches in favour of it had turned her against it, as there was clearly “more of an agenda” than just allowing more oversight of the process.

Oversight of the process is what the House of Lords is for. The Lords do many different things, but in the Chamber itself about 40% of their work involves scrutiny—debating, asking questions, and responding to ministerial statements and such things. The other 60% of their time is spent improving draft legislation—primary legislation and statutory instruments. From speaking to a number of Members of the House of Lords, it is clear to me that they spend a lot of time on, and take a lot of interest in, statutory instruments—probably more so than the Commons does, where we typically rely on a Government majority to get them through. The Lords take their role of scrutiny and adding their expert view very seriously.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that regardless of the legislation being considered, in a country that I would hope considers itself to be a democracy, it is an affront that we have more than 800 unelected peers, with 13 new appointments recently, while we face the prospect of the democratic Chamber being further reduced?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I will talk about the need to reduce numbers later. I will also talk about the practicalities of whether we have an elected or appointed upper Chamber, how we could reform an appointed Chamber, and the need for an upper Chamber in the first place. Should we go unicameral as New Zealand has? I will consider whether there is scope for doing that.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): We have unicameral Chambers in Scotland and Wales. We may or may not have issues with the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament, but it all seems to work perfectly well.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. A unicameral system can work perfectly well and I have no doubt that we would survive quite happily with such a system, but the House of Lords can, and often—though not always—does offer something that is related to its composition: one advantage of having an appointed system is that we can bring in experts who can add expertise that we do not necessarily have in the Commons.

To give some examples, from the world of science we have the brain pioneer Baroness Greenfield, fertility expert Lord Winston, and Lord Darzi. From business, we have the former chief executive of HSBC Lord...
Green of Hurstpierpoint, Lord Rose from Marks & Spencer, and Lord Sugar. For social policy challenges, we have Baroness Newlove, Baroness Lawrence and Lord Bird, the creator of The Big Issue. When it comes to culture, we have Lord Bragg and the former head of the BBC, Lord Hall. We also have both the Lords Palumbo: one was chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain; the younger, Lord Palumbo of Southwark, was the founder of the Ministry of Sound. We have sporting people, such as Baroness Grey-Thompson and people from public services such as Lord Dannatt, who adds military expertise, and Lord Hogan-Howe, a former Metropolitan Police Commissioner.

We also have people from the security services, philanthropists, human rights campaigners, religious leaders—beyond the obvious statutory role of the bishops—legal experts, academics and, of course, former Members of this place, who at least have an understanding of the parliamentary process and can help to get business through. Perhaps we can cover that in a bit more detail later.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes the argument that many Members of the House of Lords have considerable expertise in certain areas of policy and that that benefits the apparatus of Government, but surely those people could be drawn in to advise the Government in many other ways, such as through setting up expert panels or simply having Government advisers. They do not have to be part of the legislature for the Government to benefit from their advice.

**Paul Scully**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that interesting point, but I am describing the existing situation, which nobody would create. We had hereditary peers in the House of Lords right up until the ’90s. The first level of reform went through under Tony Blair, but nothing was really put in its place. We are in that halfway house at the moment.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I would not want the hon. Gentleman inadvertently to mislead the House. Perhaps he will put on the record the fact that there are still 92 hereditary peers.

**Paul Scully**: Forgive me. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come to that point later in my speech. I was talking about when there were solely hereditary peers. I thank him very much for allowing me to correct the record.

The House of Lords clearly needs to do more, however it is composed, to ensure it is representative of the country, not just by reflecting public political opinion, expressed in general election results, but by having more women and people from ethnic backgrounds. It is interesting to note, however, that both leaders of the two main parties in the Lords are female, and that all three leaders of the main parties are younger than their counterparts in this place. Funnily enough, the House of Lords has done its bit for gender equality by electing its first male Lord Speaker, Lord Fowler. It has a good record of supporting women in the most senior positions, but clearly there is more it can do.

The work of the Lords is not just the legislation debated in the Chamber, but its Committee work. Its Select Committees are formed differently from ours: while ours tend to reflect Departments, its Committees tend to be more cross-cutting. The Science and Technology Committee, for example, makes the most of the House of Lords’ expertise. Essentially, the House of Lords does things that the House of Commons does less of because the time available, and our different political imperatives and priorities, drive us in different ways. However, it should not go beyond its remit, as it clearly has on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

A lot of checks have been introduced over the past 100 years. The Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949 prevent the House of Lords from blocking legislation and money resolutions. It can hold up Bills for up to a year, but the Government can reintroduce them without seeking the House of Lords’ consent at the beginning of the next parliamentary session. Having some tension is no bad thing, but there have to be limits, and the House of Lords has overstepped the limits in this instance.

The Salisbury convention would normally kick in for a measure such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, because, like our pledge to leave the customs union and the single market, it was clearly in our 2017 manifesto. However, that only prevents the Bill from becoming law in this parliamentary Session. There is obviously a timescale issue with the EU withdrawal Bill, because we will leave the EU at the end of March next year, so we have to get the Bill through in plenty of time to ensure we leave in an orderly way. If it is held up for too long or changed beyond recognition, that will affect our negotiating position now and our capacity to leave the EU in an orderly way next March.

**Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): We are in the rather strange and unusual situation of having a two-year parliamentary Session. If we had stuck to the normal protocol of having a one-year session, the Parliament Act could have applied and the blockage could have been removed in time for us to leave the EU in March next year. The Government are at fault for having this extended Session, which has rendered the Parliament Act rather difficult to deploy.

**Paul Scully**: These are obviously unusual circumstances for all manner of reasons. Brexit and the two-year Session are incredibly unusual. I have talked a lot about the fact that, in my view, the Lords have overstepped their remit. The petitioner is not talking about the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, so I will park that after this point. We need to look at the Bill as a whole. The Lords may be thwarting the Government now, but it depends on how the process finishes. If we can get the Bill into the form originally intended after consideration of Lords amendments on Wednesday and Third Reading, even if it has been amended, which is exactly what the Lords are there to do, as long as it has not been amended beyond recognition and its original remit—there will have been a lot of tension—we will have got there in the end. A lot of the things we do in this place may look odd or arcane to people, but they tend to have a way of working. That is done not just in the Chamber, but through the usual channels and debate and discussion outside the Chamber.
The reforms have been only half completed. The possibility of having an elected Chamber has been mentioned. That is one option. Do we abolish? Do we go elected? Do we have a hybrid system with a mix of elected and appointed peers, or do we keep it the same? I do not think anybody is saying we should keep it exactly the same. We went through the process of looking at an elected House of Lords before my time in this place, and nobody could agree on the detail. Although there was a lot of sympathy for having at least an elected element of the House of Lords, no one could say what percentage it should be and how long the terms should be. That is one reason why it did not go through. It will take a lot of parliamentary time—I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say about this—if that proposal were to come back to us. What could we agree on and coalesce around?

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman is describing the various reforms to the House of Lords over the years, and I think he would agree that the process has stalled somewhat in recent years. All those reforms were motivated by people who wished to see the Lords become more accountable and were concerned that people were in a position to make laws that apply to citizens without being accountable. Does he agree that it is rather ironic that citizens are petitioning the House of Commons asking for reform, and that the Government are doing nothing to reform it and will not make time available, yet the House of Lords is arguing for reform because its crisis of legitimacy has become so acute?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The nub of the problem is this: what kind of reform do we want to achieve? Hon. Members who were here under the coalition Government talked about having an elected House of Lords, but they could not agree on one simple solution. The Lords are talking about reform, and I will cover that point in a second.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about hereditary peers. The daft thing is that, with the 92 who are left, it is a halfway house. I understand why people are concerned about the House of Lords and either want to change it or question its legitimacy. In 2016, we had a ridiculous situation when there was a by-election for one of the Members of the House of Lords. A Lib Dem peer, Lord Avebury, died, and seven hereditary peers from around the country were put up for election, but the electorate was only three. How daft is it to have an electorate that is half the size of the field of candidates? It makes a mockery of the process, so we clearly need to look at the situation.

The Government have already gone some way towards trying to lay a path to change. The House of Lords Reform Act 2014 allowed Members, for the first time, to retire or resign permanently. Those who do not attend or are convicted of a serious offence that carries a prison sentence of a year or more cease to be Members. That was not the case before. Again, it is a bit daft and I am glad it was sorted out.

The House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015 enabled a suspension running beyond the end of a Parliament to be imposed on a Member, and allowed the House of Lords to expel Members. As part of that process, University of Strathclyde politics students came here, and we discussed the issue with them. Just this morning, pupils of Steyning Grammar School came to do a tour of this place, and went to the education centre—a fantastic resource. Instead of just having a question and answer session, we spent the afternoon with Members talking down and started to look at the options for reform, including abolition. Interestingly, both sets of students unanimously agreed that we should not abolish the House of Lords or elect it. They said we should carry on with appointed peers, but with significant change.

The students looked at the House of Lords and asked why people would be motivated to sign such a petition. They felt that it was because of a lack of understanding: the House of Lords sounds old-fashioned and undemocratic, lacks visibility, is not diverse or reflective of society—people could not relate to it—and it seems to be comprised largely of politicians for life, in effect, with Members moving from one end of the building to the other. Hereditary peers were also a concern. Those students, however, still believed it to be an important institution, which does more scrutiny with a lot of expertise—peers expert in their field and with nothing to lose—so they did not believe that it should be abolished.

How should the House of Lords be reformed? The Strathclyde students said that the bishops should be removed and talked about whether to remove political affiliation—to go totally Cross Bench—but they could not agree how. Again, we come back to the question of how to reform the House of Lords. The students wanted stronger emphasis on post-legislative scrutiny, with Committees looking at laws a year later or so to see whether they are working.

The Steyning Grammar School group had a similar discussion. One student did not believe that we should even reduce the numbers. She made an interesting point: the larger size allows for more diversity and a wider range of opinions. We have talked about how there is not enough diversity in that place, but there is scope. Not everyone turns up for every debate, so there are plenty of opportunities to speak for black and minority ethnic Members or women Members, depending on the subject matter—they are being drawn from a bigger pool.

Everything comes back to what reforms are possible and what reforms are being looked at by the Lords themselves in the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House—the Burns Committee. The Committee has come up with some interesting ideas. It, too, believes that the House is too big—we are talking about 800 Members, which makes it one of the biggest legislative bodies in the world—and recommends that membership should be reduced to and capped at 600 Members, which would bring it into line with this place should the boundary reviews go through later in the year.

The Committee also recommended linking composition of the House of Lords to general election results. It would reduce membership to 600 in just over a decade through a natural system—an accelerated “two out, one in” programme—with new Members appointed for a 15-year term. No party would be allowed an absolute political majority, and a minimum of 20% of seats would be reserved for independent Cross-Bench Members, largely appointed by the House of Lords Appointments Commission. The students to whom I was speaking all felt that patronage should be reduced if not removed, so an independent commission should have far greater say in membership of that place.
Political appointments, if there are any, should be shared between the parties. The Burns Committee believes that those should be in line with the result of the previous general election, defined as an average of the party share of the national vote and the seats won in this place. That formula and the 15-year term would together ensure that the composition of the House of Lords reflected the country over the medium term.

If consensus can be achieved in the House of Lords, I hope that that would start to bring that place into a semblance of order, though it would not be enough for some, such as those present who have been arguing for election or the petitioner, who is arguing for abolition. However, people might start to relate to the House of Lords and see it use the expertise that the Lords undoubtedly have, concentrating on things that need to be done. Given that, we need to understand the concern that the Lords must still, quid pro quo, stay within its existing remit. We should never lose sight of the fact that what matters ultimately is the contribution of peers to the scrutiny and improvement of legislation, and the difference that they can make when doing that.

4.53 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Walker.

Many Members will be familiar with the Dunyan-on-the-Wold by-election. The winning candidate, S. Baldrick of the Adder party, stood to represent a constituency whose population consisted of three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named Colin and a small hen in its late 40s. The candidate went on to surprise everyone by achieving 16,472 votes. I am of course referring to the plot of an episode of “Blackadder the Third”.

All very amusing, but that scenario is only slightly less absurd than the one referred to in the opening comments of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully): the election on 19 April 2016 of Viscount Thurso of Ulbster, who was one of seven candidates before an electorate of three. I am pleased to report that on that occasion at least the turnout was 100%. It gets worse, because despite being elected by only three people, Viscount Thurso actually boasts one of the largest democratic mandates among the 780 Members of the other place.

If that was the plot of a comedy series, we would laugh; if that was the situation in another country, our media would sneer; but that is what apparently passes for democracy in the United Kingdom in the 21st century. The situation is one that successive Governments have chosen to allow, and the response of the Government to the petition that we are debating shows that things are unlikely to change. They said:

“Whilst comprehensive reform is not a priority, the Government will also continue to work to ensure that the House of Lords remains relevant and effective by addressing issues such as its size.”

I argue that it is extremely difficult for the House of Lords to be relevant as long as it remains unelected. The fact that 169,000 people have signed the petition that we are debating shows that we cannot continue to kick the issue down the road or into the long grass. This historical aberration has to change.
to scrutinise legislation. The truth, however, is that out of the 13 most recent nominations, seven were former Members of Parliament, one a former general secretary of the Labour party and one a former deputy chairman of the Conservative party. Indeed, since the Life Peerages Act 1958, a third of the 1,452 peers created have been former MPs who were therefore relieved of the bothersome inconvenience of having to obtain the consent of the electorate before being allowed to continue in public life. Many more nominees were councillors, party donors or staff. Of the Members appointed since May 2010, half are either former MPs or former local councillors, and a further fifth are former special advisers or party employees.

It appears that there is very little difference between the qualifications and types of people in the two Houses. In response to the argument about expertise, what is it about earning the legitimacy of the popular vote that precludes a person from having expertise on a particular subject? The House of Commons has plenty of experts from all walks of life. The fact that they have to face elections does not seem to prevent them from coming here in the first place.

David Linden: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, because I think of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who was a breast surgeon for 33 years. She makes an enormous contribution to the House of Commons in health questions and in health legislation, but she still had to go to the electorate before being allowed to continue in public life. Many more nominees were councillors, party donors or staff. Of the Members appointed since May 2010, half are either former MPs or former local councillors, and a further fifth are former special advisers or party employees.

We have heard a lot about how the Lords’ actions during the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill may have changed some Members’ opinions about the way in which the other place operates. I do not have any truck with that, just as I have no truck with people who have become converts to the House of Lords because of the way in which they have recently operated. Just because the Lords vote in a way on a particular occasion that suits someone’s political view does not negate the overall democratic deficit that its continued existence in its current form represents. Let us not allow the day-to-day decisions and the painfully slow incremental reform to cloud the big picture: the House of Lords belongs to a bygone era of privilege, establishment and a closed political world, when we are becoming a much more open society. The time has come to end this relic of an earlier age and bring our democracy into the 21st century.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): During the early part of the 19th century, the power in this country began to shift away from those whose right to make legislation was inherited through an accident of birth, who generally sat in the House of Lords. Instead, it began slowly and imperfectly to go towards those who had won the support of the public in some way and who, therefore, were more likely—although not necessarily—to have gained their position through ability and hard work. They, of course, sat in the House of Commons.

At that time, as we both know, Mr Walker, the old Tory party started to disappear. Historians say that the last Tory Prime Minister was the Duke of Wellington—I will come back to his successor in a minute. Those old Tories began to be replaced by people such as Peel and Disraeli. It is sad that one of Wellington’s descendants is among those who seem to have forgotten the lessons of history and the importance of the Parliament Acts in our constitution. They are hell-bent on overturning the result of the referendum and the 2017 election, in which 90% of the public voted for the two major political parties that stood on an explicit manifesto commitment to withdraw Britain from the European Union.

The House of Lords is an unelected body that still contains nearly 100 people who sit there, interfering in the legislation of this country, simply because of an accident of birth. That is outrageous. The House of Lords is also answerable to the people and is unrepresentative. We heard earlier about the fact that there is not enough representation of women or ethnic minorities in the House of Lords. There is also not enough representation of people with different political views.

As democrats, how can we explain and defend the fact that nobody from the UK Independence party has ever been appointed to the Lords, despite the fact that millions of people have voted for that party in successive elections for the European Parliament and in general elections? Even at the last election, where the two major political parties took UKIP’s major policy of pulling out of the EU, it still got nearly 2% in the vote. Where are its Members in the House of Lords? I have never voted UKIP and I would never advise anyone to do so, but I am a democrat and I recognise the rights of millions of people who have supported that political party. Members of that party have earned the right to be there. It is ridiculous that the Duke of Wellington is able to interfere in legislation that affects this country, but Nigel Farage, who was the leader of a major political party that has had a major impact on this country, is not invited to sit in the House of Lords. He has a far greater moral right to be there than the Duke of Wellington.
As I said earlier, I joined not the Tory party of Wellington, but that of Peel and Disraeli, and later of Churchill and Mrs Thatcher. When I look at history, I see that the belief in free trade united all those people over the centuries. That belief brought Peel to get rid of the corn laws in the 1830s and it is why Winston Churchill in the early part of the 20th century, before he became known for saving us from the blight of fascism, was best known for his sterling defence of free trade and his opposition to locking Britain into a trading arrangement with countries with which we were said to have some sort of historical relationship. Those people all embodied a belief that people should reach their position on merit, achievement and hard work, not simply through an accident of birth.

As a Conservative, I say that the Lords is an anachronism long overdue for reform. The hereditaries are an insult to 21st-century democracy. To any Ministers who are listening, I say that now is the time for a reformed and representative House of Lords, with Members who are there by merit and not by birth. Now is the time for us, as Conservatives, to remember that we are at our best when we seize the opportunity to reform, instead of waiting for others to do it. We will wait a long time for our lordships to grasp it. Let us do it know, rather than waiting for others to do it. We will wait a long time for when we seize the opportunity to reform, instead of

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was here in 2003—he may have avoided that—when we had the vote on the future of the House of Lords. A White Paper offered seven options, all seven of which the House of Commons voted down. We do not have a terribly good track record of addressing the issue. We looked again in 2007—I think the hon. Gentleman was with us then—and made some progress. Surprisingly, the Commons came to an agreement that we wanted our Parliament to be bicameral, with an elected upper Chamber and that hereditaries would be abolished. Sadly, the Government fell in 2010, and for the last eight years we do not seem to have made much progress.

It is about time we revisited the issue, because it is pretty obvious that this petition strikes a chord. People do not sign in such numbers—169,000 and mounting as we speak—unless they feel quite strongly about an issue. The petition may have been brought on by Brexit and people’s antagonism towards the Lords for the way it has performed, but the debate goes much deeper than that. As someone with an awful lot of friends in the Lords—I may have fewer after this speech—I think it is time that we looked at what we want to be done, not just by the Lords but by the Commons.

I think I voted in favour of an elected chamber last time around, but I now believe we must abolish the Lords. Why have I come around in favour of abolition? Quite simply, it is because I do not believe we will ever do anything unless we abolish the Lords. We would have to put something in its place, but we must start with the nihilistic approach, if I can put it like that, of getting rid of what exists. We cannot carry on in the way we have been going. The latest attempt at reform by the Lord Speaker’s Committee demonstrates why we cannot let the House of Lords reform itself. The proposal is minimalistic and unacceptable, and I am sure it will never get through the Commons, so I do not know why it was even brought forward.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I agree that we need to abolish the Lords and start again, but we have seen that we need a bicameral Parliament. The Lord Speaker’s Committee has broad agreement in the Lords, so it should be seen as a starting point. If we made a radical proposal, the Lords themselves would vote it down and we would not get any further. To quote Voltaire, I do not think we should let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We need a proposal that can get through both Houses.

Dr Drew: That may be true, but I am an idealist, and I believe that we ought to seek out the best solution. Otherwise, we will always end up compromising—although compromises may well have to be allowed along the way.

Let me concentrate for a moment on the Commons. I have always argued that one of the problems with the Commons is that we pass too much bad legislation and we rely on the Lords to get it right through scrutiny and revision. If we got it right in the first place, we would not necessarily need another Chamber to do that. Again, that may be idealistic, but I feel strongly that the Commons must do its job better. There are all sorts of reasons why we cannot do our job satisfactorily: we are all too busy, so we all multi-task too much. We have Westminster Hall as a second debating chamber, which is great—those of us who argued for it thought it would open up debate for Back Benchers—but we are now criticised all the time by the public for never being in the main Chamber, and no one ever listens to our debates. We have to try to box and cox—we must realise that there is no perfect solution, but that there are solutions we can help along the way.

One of the reasons I would get rid of the Lords is that we have a fundamental problem with this building, which we will have to vacate sometime soon. Now is the time to look at what sort of structure we want. It would be daft to have that debate after we came back into the new building—it will be new, because it will in effect be rebuilt from the bottom up—whatever form it takes. It would be sensible to have it now and to establish what the second Chamber should look like, if we want one.

The one thing I disagree with the petitioners about is their assertion that the decision should be handled by a referendum. Anyone who read what I said last week will know that I do not agree with referendums being used for anything at the moment, given what happened with Brexit. It is about time Parliament reasserted its authority and decided what it wants to do. We would then face the consequences, because the electorate would either vote for us or not. As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), I am not happy with what the Lord Speaker’s Committee has
come forward with, which seems like a temporary solution—an aberration—when we need a radical overhaul of the way our Chambers operate.

If I do not want the second Chamber to continue as it is, how do I see it operating, and how do I see that situation being arrived at? Its role should be to scrutinise and to take an overview of legislation. The Lords does that well at the moment, but I do not want a second Chamber that in effect replicates the Commons. I was told many times while Labour was in government, “The Commons won’t agree to this, but don’t worry—we can get it through in the Lords.” That always made me look pretty stupid, because I would argue the case in the Commons and lose, only for that decision to be overturned in the Lords, where common sense prevailed. That may seem a jolly good reason for having the Lords, but I think it is a negation of what should happen in the Commons. We should take authority, debate and deliberate on things and then pass legislation, but we should do a better job of that.

I am not in favour of an elected second Chamber. I would make it a selectorate, keep it to about 200 people and allow those people to be representative of different ethnic groups, regions and interests. How would that be arrived at? I think Select Committees should interview appropriate people. I do not know whether hon. Members remember the people’s peers. I think we created about six and then the whole idea died a death. That was a daft idea—it was one of new Labour’s “Let’s share it out of the second Chamber.” That may be idealistic, but who will not challenge the Commons? I would make those Members of the Commons. I am basically saying that we should take the politics out of the second Chamber. That may be idealistic, but I want expertise in that Chamber. I want people who know about science and the arts—people who know about the finer details of legislation, including the law, religion and so on—but who will not challenge the Commons. That is the problem—in effect, we have two Chambers challenging each other. We see that in the attrition over Brexit, but it has happened time after time, because traditionally the Lords has championed opposition to the Government. In normal circumstances—this is not the case at the moment with a hung Parliament—the Government believe they can get their legislation through. Abolishing the Lords would put the onus on the Commons to get that legislation right. If it did not, the Government would pay the consequences.

In conclusion, I feel that this is the right time to have this debate, so I welcome the petition, although I do not want a referendum—I want the issue to be decided by Parliament. That may be where the Lords comes in with its blocking role, but that is for it to decide. It would lose its credibility completely if it were seen to stand in the way of efforts to evolve what I think is the proper bicameral arrangement, in which one element of Parliament is democratically accountable and the other provides expertise and helps the process of the elected people.

My final point is that whatever money we save from the House of Lords should be given to MPs—not in pay but to run our offices. We are all overwhelmed with constituency work. That work gives us our grounding, and it is why we are different. We know what is going on in our constituencies because our constituents tell us. The problem is that we need additional resources to do a decent job, but our resources are capped. I would therefore put the money we saved from the Lords into running our offices, which would allow us more time to do our job in the Commons as we should.

5.18 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

Let me start in a way that might portray me as a lawyer who is interested only in the detail of things. I am sorry for taking that position, but I do so to pick up on something said by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). The issue, as it is described in the e-petition, falls into two parts. There is a bit about the House of Lords, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke about in detail—I will come back to that—but the petition also calls for a referendum on the subject.

I am surprised that no reference has been made to the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is a non-EU body, completely separate from that. It was set up in 1949 and is made up of a whole number of organisations. One such organisation is the Venice Commission: the European Commission for Democracy through Law. I suspect it is another body full of lawyers, but it does come up with interesting material. In 2005, the Venice Commission first came up with an analysis of how referendums should be conducted. That work is being continued by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), who is in the process of producing a booklet setting that out. If I may say so, one problem right at the beginning is with how our referendum on our membership of the European Union fits into that; she has some difficulty with that.

The Venice Commission likes to consider whether there is a national tradition of referendums. If we look just across the water to Ireland and its recent referendum on abortion, we see in that country there is a formal need for a referendum to change the constitution. We do not have such a requirement in British law to change our constitution. We must hang on to that as our starting point for where we are going.

The approach taken by the former Prime Minister in saying that any constitutional issues should be subject to a referendum was a haphazard and chaotic one. It was not thought through in its entirety or in the level of detail I would have expected from him. We are where we are with that, and I do not suggest that we rerun the EU referendum—anything but—but we cannot simply go on piling constitutional referendums on top of each other until we have our house in order.

The petition was inevitably influenced by the House of Lords’ reaction to Brexit. Many hon. Members have commented on how that House has overreached itself in proposing certain amendments. There is, however, a conflict with the Venice Commission’s guidance on how a referendum should be conducted and the aftermath of such a referendum, and we must bear that in mind so we do not make the same mistake again. For the reasons more succinctly stated by the hon. Member for Stroud,
I do not like referendums either, and I would not recommend one for this sort of activity. It is something we need to do ourselves.

The Lord Speaker’s Committee is a starting point. It is clearly not the finishing point. Additional work needs to be undertaken and time pressure is needed to come up with something that will reform the House of Lords. The difficulty with that is that, for reasons everyone will know, it is not a priority for the Government to undertake a large constitutional reform of the House of Lords at this stage. We simply have to live with that.

I repeat that, as we are a member of the Council of Europe and have been since 1949, why do we not use its material, produced all the way through with Members of this House, in our deliberations? It is as if we cut ourselves completely off from it and pretend it does not exist. The arguments that we should do this ourselves are valid, and I am pleased to recommend them to the Minister.

5.25 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I came here with no intention of making a speech, but I was reminded by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) of those days back in 2011 and 2012 when the coalition was in office and House of Lords reform was debated in the main Chamber in Government time. It was frustrating that there were numerous reforms with which we all agreed and would have proceeded had our partners in the coalition not been so wedded at the time to the concept of an elected second Chamber that nothing else mattered. The entire reform programme fell pretty well as a result of that intransigence.

I was amused, as I always am, by the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). I agreed with some elements but not with others. I took it—I hope I am not misquoting him—that he gave a pre-refusal should he be offered the honour of a place in the House of Lords when his long, illustrious political career in the Commons comes to an end. He can always intervene and tell me if I am wrong, but if that is the case, it is one less to worry about.

As I mentioned in an intervention, this debate is about the primacy of the House of Commons. All those years ago those measures fell because we could not find a way around the fact that, if we wanted the Commons to be a proper representation of public opinion and public feeling and not to be compromised, it had to have primacy. This is an argument not against House of Lords reform, but against having elected elements in it, and particularly some of the crazy schemes for two seven-year terms or whatever. The moment there is any suggestion of an elected element to the upper House, the Commons would suffer as a consequence.

It seemed we could not get around the idea that we were considering not abolition or reform of the House of Lords but wholesale constitutional reform of Parliament, and of the Commons in particular. It struck me then, and it strikes me now, that if as a result of the mood of the electorate we had a substantial Government majority in the Commons matched in the House of Lords, checks and balances would be significantly reduced, and the ability of the Lords to review, improve and scrutinise legislation—sometimes aggressively—would be somewhat reduced.

We should not be too pompous about some of the arguments we are getting from the House of Lords at the moment. It is important that the Government’s position on Brexit is challenged, however uncomfortable that might be. It is a little early to write off the House of Lords—in my view it is an anachronism worthy of abolition—before the process has ended.

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman is basically saying there would be a problem with which House would be the most legitimate at any given point if both were elected. Will he speculate on why so many countries across the world manage to have a bicameral structure with two elected houses without that problem arising? If he thinks that problem is fundamental to the structure of Parliament, should we not first exhaust the possibility of a unicameral legislature before deciding whether and what type of revising Chamber we might wish to have?

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman is right. This is not about dismissing other potential reforms. I am simply making observations about why, back in 2011 and 2012, when we had the opportunity and momentum and there was spirit behind the proposals, they failed. They failed because they spooked Members of the House of Commons, who thought their primacy was in danger of being compromised. Unsurprisingly, they also spooked Members of the House of Lords, who felt that they would have to face the vulgarity of an election from time to time. We have to be pragmatic, and my point is about pragmatism. If we want to proceed, it is no good quoting what may be the case in other countries, however bona fide their examples may be; we must get the proposals through both Houses of Parliament. I am interested in exploring ways in which we can legitimately do that and make progress.

The other point I would make in response to the intervention of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is that if we can dip our toe in the reforming water and find that it is actually okay, other reforms will follow. Part of the situation is a fear of anything different. I suspect that if we can make the process evolutionary rather than revolutionary, many of the reforms we have talked about that have so far apparently been impossible will become a little easier. I am not attempting to dismiss the hon. Gentleman’s comments. They are legitimate, but we must look at them in the context of the history of numerous attempts in the past 10 or 20 years to address the problem, most of which have been unsuccessful so far.

As I was attempting to explain, the Brexit situation stimulated interest in House of Lords reform. I have no particular fear of the Lords making uncomfortable observations about the direction in which the Government are going, but I would take a different view if it became obvious that the Lords’ intention was to frustrate the will of the elected Chamber. Those two things are different and we are not there yet. We might be there in a matter of days, but we are not there yet, and therefore we are unable to pass or should be cautious about passing sentence today.

The hon. Member for Stroud hinted at reforms that could bring about progress. I am entirely sympathetic to a reduction in numbers—not so much for the Commons,
in case the Minister is listening, but for the House of Lords. I completely understand that. He also mentioned expertise. I agree with pretty well all of his contribution, although I suspect that if we went down a different route it might cost money rather than saving it. The positions might have to be salaried if an appointments panel simply advertises vacancies and selects people—if we create a second Chamber that is properly diverse and representative, it could come at a salaried price.

Thirdly, there may be opportunities to look again at the Parliament Act 1949. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who opened the debate, pointed out, that has its drawbacks because it was created at a time when the present circumstances were not anticipated. Perhaps revisiting it with a view to ensuring that the Commons can get its way in a rather more timely fashion might be one way in which to start making sensible progress. We need a pragmatic approach to reform. Otherwise we shall find, as we often have so frustratingly in the past, that no progress can be made because someone somewhere will lose out. If we continue to make proposals that are not politically digestible, we will have this debate again in a few years’ time.

5.33 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is as ever a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I look forward to doing so again on Wednesday next week. I commend the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for opening the debate, and thank the 116 constituents of the centre of the universe that is Glasgow East who signed the petition. I left huge amounts of space in my notes for summing up the contributions made in the debate. Petitions debates in Westminster Hall are normally stuffed, and sometimes Members cannot get a seat. I am quite struck by how empty it is this afternoon. I am sure it is nothing to do with the fact that quite a lot of MPs are conscious that when they leave this place they can go and park their backsides on the red leather. Perhaps there is an issue of self-interest. I do not know; I am only speculating.

There is something rather ironic. I was saying to the staff in my constituency office that I will conclude this week with a visit to a care home in my constituency on Friday. I thought it was remarkable that I would be able to talk this afternoon about another care home—the House of Lords. Anyone who watched the programme “Meet the Lords” will have heard people talking about it as the most exclusive day care unit in central London. To say that the noble Lord Palmer, who took part in the documentary, is a bit of a character would be putting it mildly. He has a 110-room mansion and was complaining about how little pay he gets at just £300 a day tax-free.

I did not know anything of this Lord Palmer chap, so I thought, “I’ll go and look him up.” I thought it would be helpful for the House, because we do not get the opportunity to talk about this often.

“Adrian Bailie Nottage Palmer, 4th Baron Palmer...is an aristocrat and landowner in Scotland. Lord Palmer succeeded his uncle in the peerage in 1990, and is now one of the ninety hereditary peers elected to remain in the House of Lords after the passing of the House of Lords Act 1999: he sits as a crossbencher.”

I am sure he is a perfectly affable chap, and in “Meet the Lords” he certainly seems like an eccentric individual. However, the point is that he has never been subject to election and sits in that place as a hereditary peer.

My position on this matter will come as no surprise, as a Scottish National party politician. I am happy to outline our position on the House of Lords. We think that it should be abolished. We have nothing to do with it—on that we are whiter than white. In our 50 years of continued parliamentary representation in this place we have never taken up a peerage despite being offered them. I am glad to say that we are not here to play the Westminster game. I am disappointed that other parties take part in it. What a shambles it is: the only larger legislature in the world is the Chinese National People’s Congress, with a total 2,987 seats. Our comrades in ermine along the corridor in the other place have 800. In comparing those numbers, we may note that China’s population is 1.4 billion, and it has 2,987 Members in the National People’s Congress. We, a country of just 66 million, have 800 of them stuffed into that absolute circus. It makes a mockery of the system.

I have spoken before, including in a Committee attended by the Minister, about my time working with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. When I do that work, I find it somewhat embarrassing, because to appear on behalf of an organisation with that name implies that this is a place of democracy. In fact, the Palace of Westminster is a place of limited democracy. A couple of weeks ago the Labour and Government Chief Whips had to issue notices to Members of the other place urging them not to fall asleep. What kind of message does that send out when I go from Westminster to Tunisia or Uganda to talk about the merits of democracy? What an embarrassment that such things happen here.

I commend to the House a wonderful book by the late Robin Cook, “Point of Departure”, in which I read a fantastic quote a number of years ago. Robin Cook wrestled with House of Lords reform. He said:

“At least we all agreed that the present half-reformed state of the Lords was unsupportable. Britain now shares with Lesotho the unenviable distinction of being the only two countries in which hereditary chieftains still retain the right to pass laws for the rest of the nation. As Foreign Secretary I had spoken in support of open government at a Europe-Africa Summit. I was rebuked by the President of an African country, which might generously be described as a guided democracy, who objected that he could not be blamed for failing to introduce full democracy after only fifty years of independence, when Britain had failed to get rid of the hereditary principle after 500 years of Parliament.”

It is remarkable. This guy is now dead and we still have hereditary peers in the House of Lords. Something else that makes a mockery of the system is the fact that we still have clerics legislating—the 26 bishops, or Lords Spiritual. The only other country that has clerics who legislate is Iran. I shall let it sink in that we are part of that.

The Minister, the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and I of course have a long-standing engagement on Wednesday mornings to consider a motion to adjourn the Committee on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. That Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), is intended to protect the House from the Government’s plans to cut the number of MPs from 650 to 600.

The Government talk a good game about cutting the cost of politics, yet they continue to stuff people into the House of Lords. We have Lords such as—I hesitate to use the word “noble”—Lord Hanningfield, who was
caught in his routine of clocking in and clocking out, wandering into the Palace of Westminster for a couple of minutes, signing on and getting his £300 a day tax-free. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who has come up with the excellent idea of somehow changing the rules and being able to track how long Members of the House of Lords are actually in the building. It certainly seems that some of them walk in and walk back out only a couple of minutes later. At the moment we have no way of tracking that, which makes a mockery of the system.

I pride myself on the fact that I start every parliamentary week by going out in my constituency and door knocking. I did the same thing before I got my half-past 12 flight to London this afternoon. I was out in the Calvay area of my constituency, an area where there are certain amounts of deprivation. My constituents in Calvay look at that place, the House of Lords, and wonder how those folk represent them.

The information brought forward by the Electoral Reform Society shows that something like 85% of peers coalesce around this little south-eastern part of England. We do not have Members of the House of Lords who represent all parts of the United Kingdom and can bring their expertise. It seems to be people from this small corner. Where are our tenement Lords? Where are the Lords from a manual labour background? It seems to me—I say this with respect to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell)—that it is all people from the professions of law and accountancy.

We then come to the issue of corruption, donors and cash for votes, whether that is the Democratic Unionist party in the House of Commons being bought off with £1 billion to go and vote with the Government, or the fact that in the past we have seen people offered peerages for donations to political parties. That also brings the place into disrepute.

There is also the question of rewards for failure. I think of the case of the constituency of Perth and North Perthshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) won his seat by, I think, 26 votes, defeating the Conservative candidate, a gentleman called Ian Duncan who was a Member of the European Parliament. My hon. Friend rightly took up his seat in the House of Commons, and does a very diligent job as Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee and shadow SNP Leader of the House of Commons.

His opponent, now Lord Duncan of Springbank, sits in the other place. Having received no votes—indeed, having been rejected at the ballot box just over a year ago—he was stuffed into the House of Lords. He was not just stuffed in there as someone to scrutinise legislation; he is now a Government Minister. We have a bizarre spectacle: of all the fine new Scottish Tory MPs, none was considered worthy to become the junior Scotland Office Minister. Instead it was left to Lord Duncan of Springbank, unelected, to fly the flag for the Scotland Office as a junior Minister.

We owe a duty of care to some of our colleagues in the House of Lords. I know that it is not the convention in this House to talk out of school and that it is a bit of an old boys’ club. However, I make no apology for saying that, on Tuesday 27 March, two or three of my hon. Friends and I were going out for a run after parliamentary business had concluded. The Lords were sitting late that night because they were considering the Nuclear Safeguards Bill. As my hon. Friends and I were getting our running gear on, we found an elderly gentleman lost in the Members’ Lobby in the House of Commons, where our cloakroom is. He was confused as to where he was. He did not know what day of the week it was. One thing we noticed was the little red and white pass he wore.

That gentleman did not realise that he was on completely the wrong side of the building. He did not know what day of the week it was, let alone what clause or schedule of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill was being considered. I understand that Governments of various colours, on a day when there is a tight vote, will try to get their people in here, but there is something incredibly serious about bringing somebody in here who does not have the mental faculties that they require to know not only what day of the week it is, but what kind of legislation they are scrutinising. That is the kind of thing that happens in here. I know it is uncomfortable for everybody in here to talk about, but we all know it happens—people are wheeled in here who do not know what day of the week it is but are somehow scrutinising legislation.

I make my final point with a degree of regret. I hold the hon. Member for City of Chester and his Labour colleagues in high esteem, but there is a challenge to the Labour party. The Labour party has talked in the past under the regime of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) about taking a principled approach to the House of Lords, but we now have these ermine comrades, the Lord Momentums. Recently, in the last round of appointments, the former general secretary of the British Labour party, Martha Osamor, was appointed to the House of Lords with another, Pauline Bryan. There is a challenge. If we are all serious about halting the shambles that is the House of Lords, we must all be signed up.

Justin Madders: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that one of the conditions of those appointments was that they would agree to vote for an abolition of the House of Lords if such a vote arose?

David Linden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I think the Liberal Democrats had a similar position as well, but I am afraid that an appointment to the House of Lords is like a political drug. Once someone starts doing it, they will just keep going. The idea that somehow these political parties will be self-regulating on this question is not one I take very seriously.

The House of Lords makes a mockery of British democracy. We can come here and have a discussion about reform or abolition—the latter is certainly my preferred option—but in my view the sooner Scotland has nothing to do with the House of Lords and the Palace of Westminster, the better.

5.46 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who did great credit to both the petition and the Petitions Committee in leading this
debate. He managed to present the arguments, and as well as giving some of his personal views, which he is entitled to do, in a fair and balanced way, he talked about the advantages of Lords reform and of a Lords with external expertise and experience. He used a phrase that particularly struck me—"the House of Lords does things that the House of Commons does less of"—suggesting that there is a complementary function.

The hon. Gentleman also outlined different options for reform, which I found interesting. There can be an academic as well as a political debate about how we proceed. Do we have an elected, an appointed or a hybrid Chamber? He suggested that one of the blocks to reform is lack of consensus on what to replace the House of Lords with, and I suggest that we have seen that in today’s debate. There is no real consensus on how we proceed, which is one of the reasons why we are not proceeding at all.

Is there not a real danger that the legitimacy of the Lords will continue to decline? My concern is that if it does, it will drag down the whole of Parliament and therefore this House as well. I was particularly interested in the responses the hon. Gentleman spoke about, from students at the University of Strathclyde and—was it Stelling grammar school?

Paul Scully: Steyning.

Christian Matheson: Steyning Grammar School. They talked about the lack of diversity in the Lords and a view that it was simply a job for life for politicians. Again, there is a danger, based on the position the hon. Gentleman outlined, that the nation is changing faster than we in Parliament are, and that we are not keeping up with changing attitudes in the nation. That is further evidence that the House of Lords is becoming further and further out of touch with the attitudes of the younger generation, which it does not reflect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked of a “closed political world” from a different century, and there is a very real danger that that is the case. He also quoted “Blackadder the Third” and the Dunny-on-the-Wold by-election, which brought a smile to my face; but again there is a danger that life imitates art and that the relevance and credibility of the whole of Parliament, not just their lordships’ House, is damaged. We are told that one in five Members of the Lords does not vote. My hon. Friend, who is also my constituency next-door neighbour, said that we should not assume, simply because someone is appointed, that gives them expertise. He is absolutely right about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) gave a considered speech about what we want the Lords to do and offered a considered view of where we in this House might be going astray, which threw an additional element into the debate. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) began by warning of the dangers of sounding like a lawyer. The ears of my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston pricked up, because he is a lawyer. However, the hon. Member for Henley did not sound like one when adding a different element to the debate on the question of how we should organise constitutional change and manage referendums.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) said he was amused by the hon. Member for Monmouth and talked about the importance of the primacy of the Commons. Again, that is an additional complication, but it is a relevant consideration when discussing reform. It is probably one reason why reform has not happened so far, because we cannot decide how it should affect our own House, let alone how it should affect the other House. I will come on to Brexit—the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire discussed our having to wait and see how the Lords behaves over the ping-pong process this week and whether it will accept the decisions of the Commons.

However, it is clear that there is a crisis of legitimacy concerning the House of Lords and how it is composed. Even if we do not feel that so acutely here, there are members of the public—169,000 of them and counting—for whom the House of Lords no longer represents a legitimate part of the legislature. The question is how we go forward.

I express some concern about the nature of the debate. It is timely, and it has come about, I believe, because an awful lot of people out there believe—potentially incorrectly; it goes back to the point by the hon. Member for Henley—our seeing in due course—that their lordships intend somehow to block Brexit, or at least the quickest and hardest Brexit possible.

Even today, in its current composition, the Lords has a constitutional role as a revising Chamber and to offer a pause to consider bad legislation. I find it ironic that some hon. Members—none of whom are here, I hasten to add—are happy to block private Members’ Bills in this place, such as those concerning free hospital car parking for carers or the long-term sick or, dare I say it, an urgently needed law to ban the revolting practice of upsquirting, using the lame excuse that they do not like legislation that has not been debated and thought through, and they use parliamentary mechanisms to stop any debate at all on such measures.

However, when the House of Lords debates thoroughly a matter dear to those hon. Members’ hearts and asks us to pause to give time for more consideration, those hon. Members are all of a sudden in arms at there having been too much debate and call for the abolition of the Lords. They cannot have it both ways. Debate is good and reflection on legislation is good, but when it comes to debate on Brexit, those hon. Members believe such debate blocks the so-called will of the people. I remind the House that Brexit is not necessarily the will of the people but the will of a slim majority of voters. I am concerned that, rather than wanting a detailed discussion about the type of democracy and the type of
legislature that we want, many of the petition’s signatories—I cannot presume to know why all of them have chosen to sign it—signed it simply through frustration over Brexit.

Attacking the Lords is part of a broader strategy that we have seen in some of our newspapers of attacking and undermining any institution that they believe might be getting in their way. Before calling the snap 2017 general election, the Prime Minister attacked the other place, describing peers as “opponents” of the Government who had “vowed to fight us every step of the way.”

We have seen hon. Members in this House attack the integrity and impartiality of the civil service, we have seen the senior judiciary being attacked and Conservative Members have been attacked in certain newspapers as traitors for standing up and voting according to their convictions.

Moving away slightly from the subject of the debate, if we really want a fairer, more open and democratic political discourse, we might start with challenging the unelected, unaccountable and uncontrolled power of those national newspapers and their billionaire owners, whose opinions taint our politics so much, long before we deal with the House of Lords. However, that is another debate for another day.

I welcome the notable conversion of Government Members to looking at the need to address the undemocratic nature of the House of Lords. For hundreds of years, the Conservative party had an in-built majority in the Lords—the hon. Member for Monmouth talked about its changing composition—but I do not recall hearing any complaints from Conservative Members during that time. However, with the abolition of most of the hereditary peers, which is an anachronism that I still find very hard to explain to foreign visitors, that in-built majority ceased to exist.

My noble Friend Baroness Smith recently reminded the other place:

“Challenge and scrutiny are not new. They were not invented by this Opposition.”

She meant the Labour Opposition. When the Labour party was in government, the then Conservative Opposition “could boast well over 500 government defeats, including 145 during the 2005-10 Labour Government and 245 during the 2001-05 Labour Government, which had an elected majority of 167” in this House. She continued:

“Those many defeats included a government Bill at Second Reading, two fatal SIs and a number of key national security measures that involved ping-pong late into the night.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 13 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 278-279.]

It is only since 2010 that Conservative Members have shown any concern about the composition of the Lords, but their response has been to pack it with more life peers than any preceding Government. David Cameron appointed more peers per year, and at a faster rate, than any other Prime Minister since 1958, when life peerages were introduced, with more from the Government party and fewer from Opposition parties. Indeed, on the weekend of the royal wedding, the Prime Minister sneaked out an announcement appointing nine Tory peers, following her predecessor’s legacy by appointing only three Labour peers. All of that is at the same time, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned, as the Government intend to press ahead with plans to cut the number of elected Members by 50. It seems incongruous that we are not considering Lords reform but we are considering cutting the size of the elected Chamber.

Let me be clear: Labour believes that the second Chamber should be democratically elected. However, the first step must be to reduce the number of peers, with a good start being to remove the remaining hereditary peers—particularly along the lines suggested in the private Member’s Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), which remains on the Order Paper. Indeed, my right hon. Friend reminds me that all but one of the hereditary peers currently sitting in the House of Lords are male; only one is female. If we are to tackle diversity, that should be a basic starting point.

There can surely be no continued justification for having hereditary Members of our legislature. The Opposition have proposed a constitutional convention to decide the best way forward for the second Chamber. We support the Burns proposals, which seem entirely sensible, as a start. Above all, we want a solution that is workable, democratic and fair, and which is generally thought through, rather than what I fear is a knee-jerk reaction to the Lords doing its constitutional role of offering our House the chance to think again, particularly on the Brexit issue before us at the moment. If we care about good legislation, we should be grateful for the chance to think again and should not be intimidated by national newspaper owners. However, we have to ask whether an appointed Chamber—let us not even mention a semi-hereditary Chamber—is suitable to be part of a democratic Parliament in the 21st century.

This subject is not going away. I commend to this House the idea of a constitutional convention so that we can get over the disagreements that are blocking the way forward and finally decide how to reform the House of Lords. I urge hon. Members to get behind the idea and get on with the discussion, so that we can get on with the reform.

5.59 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, as it was earlier to serve under that of Mr Walker. I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Stroud (Dr Drew), my hon. Friend the Members for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) and, of course, the Front Benchers: the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). I continue to welcome listening to those colleagues with whom I seem to trot this territory fairly regularly, and it gets better every single time.

I am also grateful, of course, to those who signed the e-petition that brought us here. I want particularly to put that on the record, because when a debate has been triggered by an e-petition—in this case, one that has been signed by a large number of people—it is important
that we note that in the debate. After all, we are democrats, and we are here today to talk about a democratic matter. We must carefully consider and give due respect to the issues raised by those who have asked us to serve in this place.

Let me state very simply the Government’s position on this matter. We do not think that a referendum on the composition of the House of Lords is the right way forward at this time. That is not something that the Government support, in part because there are many other priorities for the Government and for parliamentary time at this time. I think that all hon. Members know that. When we consider the extent of the parliamentary business that we need to complete to secure a controlled and stable exit from the European Union—not including other things that we wish to do on domestic subjects—it is clear that we need to deal in priorities. I want to be honest about that early in my contribution to the debate.

It is also important to note that although the request in the petition is for a referendum as the specific manner of achieving the reform, the Government are not prepared to agree to that at this time. We note that referendums are costly and time-consuming. As evidenced by today’s debate, House of Lords reform continues to be a subject on which there is no consensus. I welcome that point being made from the Opposition Front Bench. Throughout this afternoon’s debate, as well as in many other places and sources, it has been demonstrated that, to say the least, there is no obvious binary-design question that could be put in a referendum, so we do not think that this is a suitable matter for a referendum at this time.

Let me turn instead to some other points made on this topic. Mrs Moon, you will recall the House of Lords (Amendment) Bill of 2012, which sought broad reform, including a predominantly elected second Chamber. That Bill was withdrawn when it became clear that even its timetabling motions could not be agreed in the House of Lords by Members of that House. That was due not to a lack of commitment from the Government of the day, but to a lack of overall agreement on what shape reform should take, so we are back to the point that there is no single clear design proposal.

Hon. Members here today should be in no doubt that the Government will ensure that the House of Lords continues to fulfil its vital constitutional role. It has an important role in scrutinising and revising legislation, and its Members bring valuable experience and expertise to the matters that it considers. Where reforms to the House of Lords, within that constitutional role, could command consensus, we would be willing to work with peers to take those measures forward—indeed, we have already done that. The Government have a track record of working with both Houses to introduce focused and important reforms.

With Government support, the House of Lords Reform Act 2014 enabled peers for the first time to retire permanently and, crucially, it provided for peers to be disqualified if they do not attend or are convicted of serious offences. We supported the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015, which provided the Lords with the power to expel Members in cases of serious misconduct. To bring things right up to date, we are pleased that 84 peers have taken advantage of the retirement provisions and that retirement is becoming part of the culture of the House of Lords.

David Linden: The Minister will recall the point in my speech about Members of the House of Lords who perhaps do not still have all their faculties. The Government have spoken about provisions that have been put in place to allow people to retire; what provisions are in place to ensure that people in the House of Lords are actually still able to do their job?

Chloe Smith: I think that the hon. Gentleman will understand if I focus on the point that we are trying to bring about a culture of retirement. It is perhaps for a person to recognise for themselves if they are no longer able to do that role. I welcome the sensitive way in which the hon. Gentleman brought that topic up in the debate. It is an important matter, but to have a culture of retirement is a very sound starting point for being able to look at any such issues.

Going ahead from here, the Government are clear that we want to work constructively with hon. Members and peers—Members of both Houses—to look at pragmatic ideas for reducing the size of the House of Lords. That is why we welcome the work of the Lord Speaker’s Committee, chaired by Lord Burns. As hon. Members will be aware, in 2016 the House of Lords passed a motion that its size should be reduced and that there should be consideration of how to do that. The Lord Speaker therefore established the Committee to identify “practical and politically viable options” for reducing the size of the House that would not require primary legislation. This is about being able to get something done, which I hear hon. Members calling for today and, I think, quite wisely; we should look at those things that can be done simply and in a way that commands consensus.

The Committee went on to make recommendations for reducing the size of the House of Lords, and peers were clearly very supportive of those measures when they were debated in December last year. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has written to the Lord Speaker with an offer in good faith to continue the restraint that she has already shown in making appointments to that House. I place it on the record that even with the latest, small number of appointments—only 13—the House is smaller now than when she first took office. It is important for that fact to be clearly on the record. The Lord Speaker will consider the next steps by reconstituting the Committee, and the Government will be very happy to look at anything further that it has to say.

I shall bring my remarks to a conclusion to allow the representative of the Petitions Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), to have the final word in today’s debate, but first I return to the point that I think it is clear, from hon. Members’ contributions to the debate, which were very thoughtful and wide-ranging, as well as from many other sources, whether that be newspaper articles, public discourse or, of course, those members of the public who have come here today to be part of this petition—I again thank them for that—that there remains a range of views, of design options and of advantages and disadvantages that could be considered as part of this question, but there is not an obvious single way forward. Therefore, I simply reiterate the point that I made earlier. The Government are committed to ensuring
that the House of Lords continues to fulfil its constitutional role as a revising and scrutinising chamber, but it must respect the primacy of the elected Chamber, which is the House of Commons. We stand ready to work with parliamentarians from both Chambers on measures that command consensus.

6.8 pm

Paul Scully: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second part of the debate, Mrs Moon. It has been a very constructive debate, with wide-ranging views. People have not held back and have raised very pertinent issues, and there are plenty of things for us to take away. I therefore thank all hon. Members for their contributions today.

The whole point of the Petitions Committee and the petitions system is that we get to speak in this place on issues that the petitioners and people want us to talk about, rather than what we want to talk about. I hope that the original petitioner and the other 169,000 people who have signed the petition feel that their issues have been aired, but this is the start of a process; it is not a single event. We always say that when we talk about petitions: it is always the start of a campaign, not the end of one. I therefore thank Robert McBride for starting the petition, and I hope we do not get away from the viewpoint from which Mr McBride started the petition, which was not through the prism of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, although I am sure that many people signed it on that basis. He started it because of his sense about, the pure angle of, the democratic validity of the House of Lords. I hope that although I gave him a fair hearing, I did not come down on his side, but I think he did carry a majority of this Chamber—people wanting to abolish or seriously go further with reform. It is clear, however, that there was no clear agreement about how we should do it. It is a complicated matter. We therefore need plenty more discussion and debate whatever form it takes to get a clear path for everyone to agree to before we move to legislation.

Fourteen out of 88 sitting days in the House of Commons were consumed by the House of Lords reform debate in 2012—that is before considering the time taken in the other place—yet it was ultimately unsuccessful and did not result in any change. We have to ensure that we can get it right.

Let us start with what we can achieve. The Burns Committee is going a long way towards doing that. I understand the sentiment of this place and the various sentiments expressed across the Chamber. That will, hopefully, be the start of a direction of reform of the House of Lords, so that people feel that they can relate to the other place and have this as a proper, democratically functioning bicameral system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 209433 relating to a referendum on the abolition of the House of Lords.

6.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 June 2018

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

UK-Romanian Relations

9.30 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered UK-Romanian relations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Betts. I declare an interest, as I am the chairman of the all-party group for Romania. I welcome colleagues who were involved in a recent all-party group visit to Romania, and those who went there a couple of years ago under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Before I talk about the current situation, it is pertinent to review the relationship between our two great countries, which has existed for more than 100 years. Our diplomatic relations with Romania were established on 20 February 1850, but there was a considerable period, particularly during the second world war and the cold war, when relations were not as friendly as they currently are, so 1990 is considered to be the start of the modern UK-Romania relationship. Our relationship has grown stronger and stronger over the past 28 years. The United Kingdom was a firm supporter of Romania’s joining NATO—I will say a bit more about that later—and the European Union.

Our relationship is not limited to our diplomatic or economic relations. Prince Charles has a sprawling estate in Transylvania and visits Romania regularly—at least once a year. This year’s visit coincided with our visit to Romania, and many of the key people met him and went to see his estate. The other great relationship is that of Prince Philip’s, so we share a royal history. Colleagues who were involved in a recent all-party group visit to Romania, and those who went there a couple of years ago under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Last summer, British troops undertook key exercises with Romania and other NATO allies in the Black sea region and the east of Romania. Our excellent ambassador, Paul Brummell, noted that it was the busiest period of activity in our bilateral defence engagement in recent memory. That demonstrates our shared history of defence and economic co-operation.

Our relationship is not limited to our diplomatic or economic relations. Prince Charles has a sprawling estate in Transylvania and visits Romania regularly—at least once a year. This year’s visit coincided with our visit to Romania, and many of the key people met him and went to see his estate. The other great relationship is that of Prince Philip’s, so we share a royal history. Colleagues who were involved in a recent all-party group visit to Romania, and those who went there a couple of years ago under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

We were hosted by Angel Tîlva and the foreign affairs counsellor to the President. We had a large number of diplomatic meetings. We also had the opportunity to have detailed discussions with the Ministry of National Defence and its cyber-security team. We saw many aspects of the work they are doing to combat the problems they face from Russia.

During our visit, six concerns were shared in almost every single meeting we had. Romania will ascend to the presidency of the European Council in January 2019, which is a crucial time for us as we leave the European Union, and is also the run-up to the European elections and the appointment of the new European Commission. All the Romanian politicians we met expressed the desire for a smooth Brexit. They have no desire to punish the United Kingdom for leaving the European Union, and they hope that our strong bilateral agreements on the policy areas we have collaborated on over the past 28 years will continue.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. On our relationships with Romania and other nation states, does he agree that, after we leave the EU next year, we can continue to build the type of relationship he is successfully and eloquently outlining with nations across Europe, irrespective of our or their EU membership? That would be very productive for both sides.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, an important part of the UK strategy is to form strong bilateral arrangements with our friends and neighbours from across the European Union. However, I am keen to highlight the importance of this particular strategic relationship, which existed long before Romania joined the European Union and NATO. It is clearly exposed to Russia, particularly in the Black sea region, and there are very important things that we have to be clear about in relation to that. All the people we met said that NATO must address the challenges from Russia in the Black sea region. The excellent document produced by the House of Commons Library strongly outlines the Russian threat to Romania and the concerns that Romania has expressed for many years about that issue.

All the people we met said they were concerned that young people from Romania are leaving the country to go to not only the United Kingdom but other parts of the European Union, demading the country of its workforce and of people who can provide professional services. People who provide labour, and people who are highly intelligent and well qualified, are leaving Romania to go to other parts of the European Union.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): On that point about young people leaving Romania and going to other parts of the EU, including the UK, does he agree with me that over the next number of years, as the
Romanian economy strengthens and grows—it has been growing very well—young people will instead stay, which will cause staff difficulties in the agri-food sector in our part of the world?

Bob Blackman: I shall come on to the question of the number of people leaving Romania and coming to this country in a few moments, but the clear concern in Romania is that the young people who leave are not yet returning in any number. They may return in future, and it is true that in certain countries, such as Poland, people have started to return and to invest. A number of people who are resident in the UK are investing in Romania, but the concern in Romania is still about the huge numbers who are leaving and, at the moment, not returning, which puts a great strain on the country.

Romanians are also concerned about the trafficking of Romanian women and children through the European Union, including the UK. People are being trafficked for the sex trade and other illicit purposes, such as the drugs trade. Clearly that is of concern to the Ministry for Romanians Abroad, and it is one of those areas that we as a Parliament need to examine, to ensure that people who come here have chosen to do so of their own free will and accord to contribute directly to our economy, as so many do.

Equally, tourism and trade provide both a challenge and opportunity. Such opportunities will grow dramatically over the next few years. Indeed, the Deputy Prime Minister of Romania, whom we met on our trip, is married to a British businessman—who I happened to see last week when he was over here. They have been married for a long time. There are also clearly strong economic bilateral relations, all demonstrating the strength of support for the United Kingdom and Romania.

One or two aspects of modern Romania and what is happening there are probably not widely known. We visited a number of Jewish sites in Bucharest. One synagogue is being turned into a holocaust museum, to commemorate and recall the tragic events in Romania during the Nazi era. In Bucharest and Romania, people are facing up to the damage done during the Nazi era and in the holocaust and to the terrible number of people murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

We also went to a Hospices of Hope centre, not only to meet the people who run the hospice there but to see their work which, in essence, is with children suffering from life-limiting illnesses such as muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis. The centre is funded almost entirely by voluntary donations from the United Kingdom. It also looks into the terrible treatment of children under the communist regime.

We saw historical stained glass windows depicting figures such as Vlad the Impaler who, if legend is to be believed, was the model for Count Dracula. He had a nasty habit of literally impaling his victims and drinking their blood, so not something we would necessarily accord with in this Parliament—[Interruption.] Not necessarily, I said. I wanted to make sure that everyone was listening. We also saw the remarkable architecture of Bucharest. It used to be known as a modern-day Paris, blending neoclassical styles with modern design, including the remnants of communist-era buildings.

Another key feature worth noting is that every meeting we had on our visit was held in English. The Romanians spoke brilliant English, and they were most accommodating. In many of the countries that we have the opportunity to visit, politicians and diplomats all speak in their own language and have a translator. In Romania, every single meeting was conducted in English, demonstrating the modern Romania—and our inability to speak another language.

I warmly thank the UK ambassador to Romania, Paul Brummell, whose term of office comes to an end this August after a number of years. He will return to this country after an extremely successful time there. He is extremely well respected and clearly does a brilliant job for us. I also thank the Romanian ambassador to the UK, Dan Mihalache, who was with us for the whole visit. He has formed excellent relations in this country for Romania. Finally, David Webster acts as the APPG secretariat and was the trip organiser, and I thank him for all the arrangements that he made for us.

Last year the Office for National Statistics put the number of Romanians in the UK at 411,000, which was an increase of 25% in a single year. The Romanians have now overtaken the Irish and the Indians to become the second most populous non-British nationality in the UK. The most recent figures I have seen for 2018 indicate that that number has now topped 500,000. The Romanian population is therefore growing, while the Polish population, which was 908,000 in 2017, has apparently started to dip as Polish citizens choose to go back to their country of origin, as I said earlier.

Romania joined the European Union in 2007, and any restrictions on the movement of Romanians were lifted in 2014. In my constituency, we have approximately 10,000 Romanians, and every single week I see more than 100 more arrive to live in the constituency. They are young people who come to work here, not only to invest their own resources in our economy, but to earn money—contrary to popular myth, not to depend on benefits applied for in the UK. These people are equally at home in the building industry and our service industry. Notably in London, in any restaurant, café, car or shop we are likely to be served by a Romanian citizen who speaks excellent English and provides excellent customer service.

The bilateral relations that I alluded to earlier come about in a variety of ways. Prince Charles going to Romania annually gives us an enviable opportunity to use those connections. Equally, the Duke of Cambridge’s cousin and the Romanian consulate recently set up in Scotland are other opportunities to enhance our soft power. In May, George Ciamba visited London. He was supposed to meet the all-party parliamentary group, but unfortunately that was not possible. I believe that he did meet our excellent Minister during his visit. He is a career diplomat, the Secretary of State for Political, Bilateral and Strategic Affairs in the Euro-Atlantic Area and, as such, leads for Romania on bilateral relations. Clearly, through him, we can build our soft power and the friendship that exists between our two countries. Furthermore, our excellent ambassador, Paul Brummell, and Andrew Noble, who replaces him in August, offer two more people with a shared relationship that can build soft power and improve understanding between our two great countries.
I mentioned the threat posed by Russia to Romania. Clearly, NATO and its members are expected to assist Romania against any and all Russian aggression. Reuters reported in February 2017 that a senior Russian official considered Romania’s hosting of elements of an American anti-missile shield as a threat to Russia. Clearly, Russia takes the view that NATO establishments in Romania are a direct threat to it. It is quite clear from talking to people in Romania that Russian aggression is deliberately calculated to cause trouble. It has up to seven active submarines in the Black sea at any one time. Russia accuses NATO of encircling it through its operations in the area.

One of the concerns being expressed for the forthcoming NATO summit is that Russia’s operations in the Black sea are not on the agenda. That is a concern to Romania. We need to send a strong message that NATO will not accept any position that threatens Romania or any other NATO ally. It is clear that in Romania’s view the purpose is not peace, not war, but what we have to always be ready for the ultimate possibility. The exercises last year were helpful in demonstrating our capability to assist Romania in its possible time of need.

I mentioned that Romania takes the presidency of the European Council from January until June of next year. It has outlined its mission statement: to look at the conclusion of Brexit, hopefully an appropriate and smooth Brexit; to prepare the new multi-annual financial framework, which will be a key challenge for the budget; and to deal with the end of the current European Commission and Parliament and the build-up of the elections thereafter.

The centenary of the great union of Romania is on 1 December 2018. It marks the unification of Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina with the rest of the Romanian kingdom. The all-party parliamentary group will set up a stall in the Upper Waiting Hall in November, to educate MPs, their staff and any visitors on that significant event in Romania’s history.

I would like the Minister to answer some questions. Firstly, what discussions are taking place between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its counterparts in Romania in preparation for the Romanian presidency? Secondly, what discussions are going on to develop the strong potential for bilateral arrangements post Brexit? Thirdly, what actions are the Government taking to ensure that Russian involvement in the Black sea is discussed at the NATO summit next month, and not sidelined as envisaged by the agenda? Fourthly, what action is being taken to combat child and other trafficking of Romanian citizens, in co-operation with the Ministry for Romanians Abroad? Fifthly, what arrangements are being made to develop trade relations and to support UK businesses in Romania? That is particularly important because many businesses that operate from the UK say that they would appreciate more help. Finally, what help is being given to develop tourism between our two great countries?

Thank you, Mr Betts, and colleagues for allowing me the time to speak. I hope we will have an interesting discussion and that we can develop the relationships between our two great countries, for the benefit of not only Romania but the United Kingdom.

9.53 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for setting the scene. In the main Chamber and across the House, he and I agree on a great many things. I am sure that on some things, we do not agree, but I have not found out what they are just yet. He takes forward issues that I am also concerned about. I am here to support him, but I also want to take the opportunity to speak about this issue, because a large proportion of my constituents are Romanian and I want to speak on their behalf.

Since I hail from a constituency with a thriving construction industry that employs a large number of EU nationals on sites—although nowhere near the scale of London—we have a job to do post Brexit to secure relations. We must reassure the Romanian nationals who have lived in my area for a great many years and those who are coming in great numbers. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) referred to the factories and the important employment in the agri-food sector. That sector is very strong in my constituency and I have those issues in my area, too. The agri-food sector employees a large number of people and adds to the economic life of Strangford, Northern Ireland and, as a result, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is important that we speak about these matters.

About a month ago I visited Romania for the first time. I had never been to Romania—before I became a Member of Parliament, I had been to very few places, to be honest. Being a Member of Parliament has given me the opportunity to enlarge my spectrum of knowledge of countries, which helps in this House. I was there to visit RAF’s Operation Biloxi as part of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, to see how the RAF squadron operates within NATO. It is important to remember that Romania is one of our NATO colleagues—the hon. Gentleman referred to that in passing, but it is important to remember the relationship we have with Romania in that sense.

We all remember the revolution. I have never been to a museum anywhere in the world like the museum in Constanţa, where a period of history has been excluded. Romania sided with Germany in the second world war, and it has blocked out that part of history, probably because it is embarrassing and something that they do not want to remember. We walked through its history to the beginning of the first world war, but then it was as if life stopped and restarted in 1944, when the communists beat the Germans and took the country back. Now it is a NATO ally. It is an important partner for us and we need to build our relationship from a defence point of view and make sure that the Romanian army, navy and air force are strong. Biloxi is important because there will be a new railhead, motorway and airfield, to make it a centre point for the distribution of NATO personnel. It is also not that far from Russia across the Black sea.

In the short time we were in Constanţa, we had the opportunity to see some of Romania’s great potential for tourism development. I hope that the Minister will look at that potential. Constanţa has not been developed as it could be. It is ripe for development and construction. The possibilities are great there; the town has been run down over the years but it has potential. The railhead and road and airport contacts will make a difference. We met the very personable mayor of Constanţa; he sells his city well. There is a lot of development in
Constanța, but they want more tourism contacts and links. We flew with Wizz Air, but Blue Sky also flies there and another company that I cannot remember. There is development, but there is potential for more. We should try to develop those contacts to a greater extent, for everyone’s benefit.

**Mr Campbell:** On tourism and trade, does my hon. Friend agree that there is scope for two-way development between Romania and the UK, as well the other eastern European nation states, to build a closer relationship that will help as a bulwark against Russia, to build that two-way trade relationship and to help the economies in both nations?

**Jim Shannon:** My hon. Friend is right—the contact is two-way. The advantage for us is that we get labour coming over, and we also have contact through people going back. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should invest in Romania. There is potential for investment, for development and for making money—investors want to make money on their projects.

Those are just some of the things I learned in my very short time in Romania. I was impressed by the people we met—by their kindness, their hospitality and their eagerness to be friends. We want to ensure that those relationships continue. The fact of the matter is that we had a great relationship with Romania before we were instrumental in bringing it into EU membership, and it appears to me that there is a desire to ensure that that relationship is protected and enhanced post-Brexit. It is my firm belief that where there is a will, there is a way. I often use that phrase—it probably comes from my mother—but it is very important today, as it was many years ago.

In 2016, the UK exported £1.8 billion of goods and services to Romania, and imports from Romania were £2.6 billion. The UK therefore had a trade deficit of around £800 million. Romania is an important trading partner, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) illustrated, that means we can do more to get the deficit back in balance. The deficit is due mainly to trade in goods; trade in services is broadly in balance. Romania is the 18th largest market in the EU for UK exports, and the 19th largest in terms of imports. I can well believe that Romania’s will to continue that trade, in which it has the upper hand, will ensure that a way is found to do that, and that is my hope. The potential is there for all to see—we just need the will to make it happen.

I am pleased that we have such a good Library briefing for the debate. That briefing makes it clear that there are many reasons for the Romanians to stand up for a fair Brexit deal that enables us to keep working with them. In its most recent figures, the Office for National Statistics estimates that some 411,000 Romanians live in the United Kingdom, which means that they are the second largest non-British national group in the UK—I believe they are second only to the Poles. The ONS estimated in 2017, using figures from 2011, that 521 British citizens lived in Romania.

The migrant workforce from Romania has a significant role in the UK economy. More than one in six people working on house building sites across Britain comes from another EU country, rising to half of site workers in London. A survey of some 37,000 house building workers across Britain showed that 17.7% were from the EU. More than half those are from Romania. Around 95% of the 29,000 seasonal workers who pick fruit in the United Kingdom are from the EU, with most coming from Bulgaria and Romania. According to Universities UK, 7,200 Romanian students were enrolled in programmes at UK universities in 2015-16, and a further 370 students are studying for UK degrees in Romania through transnational education provision.

Let me be clear: I do not cite any of those statistics to drag up the Brexit question. That question was put, the answer was received and the deal needs to be done. I do not need to defend Brexit—the nation backed it and we are going to move on—but I want to highlight the good relationship between our nations. That must continue post-Brexit for the sake of both nations, and I very much look forward to ensuring that that happens.

Northern Ireland has a very strong link with Romania. In 2014, more than 1,400 Romanians registered for a medical card in Northern Ireland, compared with only 200 to 300 in each of the previous four years. National insurance number applications also increased in 2014; in 2012-13 there were just 268 applications from Romanians, but that figure rose to 972 and 2,424 in the following two years. That shows a clear trend of people coming from Romania to Northern Ireland, and specifically to Strangford. I am pleased to have them there working, co-operating, socialising, taking their children to school and very much being part of my cosmopolitan constituency.

In conclusion, Romanians should be able to continue to live and work in the United Kingdom provided they have a desire to, but let me say clearly that there is an onus on Romania to speak up in Europe to allow that relationship to continue. We always hear, with respect to Brexit, about the negotiations and discussions that take place about our position, but the other countries in Europe need us, too. Romania needs us, as do all the other 27 countries. We need the partners we already have in Europe to speak up for us, as we speak up for them. We want our relationship with Romania to continue beyond 31 March 2019. I believe that would be beneficial to both countries: to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—better together—and to Romania. We are better with them as well.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): And a Londoner scored both goals.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a fellow member of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. He made a typically extensive and interesting speech.

There are three reasons why I am delighted to take part in the debate, Mr Betts. The first is the fact that you, a fellow Yorkshireman, are in the Chair. The second is that today we are celebrating a great victory by an England squad with no fewer than seven Yorkshire-born members.

**Stephen Pound**: That is a minor detail, but yes.

The third reason is that the debate was secured by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who led our delegation to Romania with great diplomacy and distinction. It was a good group—we had two
Scottish nationalists, one Labour Member and one Conservative Member. We were not quite representative of the nation, but he led us very ably and I learned a great deal from the visit.

I will not repeat the hon. Gentleman’s remarks; instead, I will try to choose five reasons to be cheerful about Romania, building on what he said. The first is democracy. We stood on the balcony of the Interior Ministry one afternoon and looked out at the same view that Ceauşescu, the dictator, had less than 30 years ago, in 1989. How well Romanian democracy has developed in that time. My first encounter with Romania was a few years ago, when I was not an MP. I looked at Leeds civic hall on a Sunday morning and saw a massive queue of people. I thought, “What are they doing?” I asked some of them, and they were Romanians who wanted to vote. Some of them had been standing there for three or four hours. Romania generally has been a success in that period. While we were there, a new political party was formed. There is a lot of intense political debate—I will come back to that—and women are very well represented in Parliament. We met some very bright young people who no doubt have great political futures.

The second reason to be cheerful about Romania is its economy, which the hon. Gentleman touched on. The Romanian economy is racing ahead. The growth rate has touched 8%, and I think it will be more than 4% this year. Sectors such as motor vehicles, electrical goods and IT all have great futures, and Romania gets an awful lot of foreign investment. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the English. As one person we met suggested, the development of English has definitely happened in this generation. There are obviously many long-standing French links in Romania, but there has been an adjustment in the past generation. We had extensive debates with people from the British Council—youngsters and young adults—and they had excellent English. One of the older students suggested that that was because Romania has always had a tradition of not dubbing foreign films but subtitling them, and that that made some difference to the learning of English, even in communist times. The Romanian economy is definitely a success story, and the United Kingdom needs a slice of it.

The hon. Gentleman referred to foreign policy. Romania has a long tradition of having an independent foreign policy—that was the case even under the Soviet Union. Reference was made to our memorable dinner at a restored synagogue. Romania has a role to play in the middle east. I learned that not only is there a Palestinian population in Bucharest, but there are long-standing links with the state of Israel. Many Jewish citizens of Romania went to Israel—in fact, Ceauşescu even demanded payments from Israel—in the period of communism. There is still a strong, small Jewish community there, and that certainly brought home to me the need continually to fight anti-Semitism wherever we are.

We look forward to Romania taking the chair of the Council of Ministers. Without prolonging references to the European debate, I envisage that if by that stage the United Kingdom were suggesting that we might stay in the customs union or even the single market, the Romanian diplomats would find a way of bringing that about. They are certainly preparing well for their period in office—they were keen to tell us about the number of people they have in Brussels for that—and they will have many options for us, should we need them.

The hon. Gentleman, who mentioned tourism, spoke about the Black sea in the important context of security, but it is also important for tourism. Many cruise ships and holidaymakers now go to the Black sea. Romania is now the sixth largest producer of wine in Europe, and we had a little Romanian wine—just half a glass.

A final reason to be cheerful: today we are all thinking about sport. Sadly, Romanian football is not as good as it used to be. However, Mr Speaker is always keen to mention the No. 1 men’s tennis player. Of course Simona Halep, the No. 1 women’s tennis player, deserves a mention, having recently won the French open.

Finally, it would be remiss for the debate to go by without mentioning corruption in Romania. It was raised at many of our meetings, and not many of the politicians were comfortable speaking about it. However, I want to do so, not least because their current Government are a sister party of the Labour party. Incidentally, corruption affects all Romanian political parties. Without going into all the details of Romanian internal politics, the position of Ms Kövesi, the state prosecutor, is under threat, and the President must rule on her future soon.

It is not good enough just to talk, as some Romanian politicians do, about the deep state and how everyone is against them. Corruption must be dealt with. It is important for all the existing and new political parties that Romanian politicians of all parties confront the issue. The new, young generation of Romanian politicians, many of whom we were privileged to meet, must make it clear that even if such ways of operation happened in the past, they will not happen in the future.

10.12 am

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Multişesc, Mr Betts. May I say what a delight and pleasure this is? I am no national chauvinist, so you will not hear me banging on about the fact that both goals last night were scored by a Londoner, and you will not hear any of this Yorkshire chauvinism, even in reverse. What you will hear is my congratulations to my neighbour to the north—not the far north; barely north of Ealing—the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing this important subject to the House.

We are fortunate in who we have on the Front Bench for the debate: not only my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who knows the subject very well indeed, but the Minister for Europe and the Americas, who is, if I may say so, one of the most impressive Foreign Office Ministers I have ever known. If I have one cavil against him it is that wherever I go, be it Belarus, Bucharest, Warsaw or anywhere, he will have been there before me and set a high bar. He will have set a standard for literacy, charm and intelligence that I can only aspire to. He represents our country extremely well, and we should be well aware of the pleasure of having him on the Front Bench.

May I cross swords with the hon. Member for Harrow East? When he spoke of the vast, untouched, untrodden forests of northern Romania as we approach the Carpathian foothills, where the wild boar and Balkan bear roam free and untrammelled, I thought to myself, “Some flipping travel agent somewhere will be noting this down and seeing it as an opportunity.” Those of us who have entered the foothills of the Carpathians as the Romanian moon flies high in the dark sky, remembering
the great and glorious traditions of he who was known as Vlad Tepeş, will have looked around us and thought, “This really is the most glorious untrodden, unspoilt part of the world.” Is it any wonder that His Royal Highness Prince Charles feels so comfortable and at home there? Duchy Originals biscuits at 500 guineas a packet are fortunately absent, for which we can only be grateful. The food we were offered on my last visit to Romania was ample and delicious.

Can we, on the one hand, praise Romania and say what a marvellous country it is and, on the other hand, say, “let it not be ruined by tourism”? There is a balance to be had in what is happening in Constanţa on the Black sea coast, particularly with the cruise ships calling there. I was intrigued to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) enjoyed half a glass of wine. I suspect that it may have been a fairly large glass—do not forget that a glass can be any size, so half a glass could be a few gallons.

Romania is a wonderful country. In some ways, its past was cursed by its mineral wealth. Ploieştiţ has been mentioned, where some of the worst, most brutal fighting in the second world war took place, with some of the greatest losses. My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about Romania’s part in that war, and we should not forget that after the coup of Prince Michael they were our allies, fighting with us against a determined and entrenched Nazi force particularly concerned with protecting the oil fields. We should be grateful for that. In fact, the history of oil exploration in Europe and the middle east could not be written without recognition of the advances made in Romania, going back 1,000 years. Axle grease for chariots was mined in Romania and became a well-known product throughout the region. We should be aware of that.

We should note our relations and close links, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Harrow East. I visited the Hospice of Hope and thought what an extraordinary building it was. It was created initially by two Englishmen who saw what was happening with paediatric illness in the country and decided that something must be done, so they raised the money for the hospice, where no other similar hospice exists. It is a testament to the close links between us.

In some ways, Romania has not had the best of all presses, but there are many things to be proud of. Reference was made to Mr Speaker, whose family originally came from Romania, as well as to tennis players. I have been privileged to have stood on the battlefields of the great noble towering castle of Braşov and looked out over the glories of northern Romania in the company of the man who in 1975 was simply the most exciting tennis player the world has ever seen. Of course, I speak of he who is now Senator Ilie Năstase. We may talk of Adrian Mutu during his time with a team who should not be mentioned from the other end of the Fulham Road, but no one can hold a racket to Ilie Năstase. What an extraordinary player. That he is now a senator says so much about modern Romania.

The other thing that struck me when I went to Romania was the language. The hon. Gentleman touched on this. Many Romanian words have an extraordinary resonance with us. For example, when someone in Romania says “goodbye” they say “la revedere.” For “good evening” they say “bună seara”, and “good morning” is “bună dimineaţa.” I see the Hansard reporters looking a little worried. Phrases such as “la revedere,” so similar to the Italian “arrivederci” — “bună seara” is also similar to the Italian—show how Romania was such a crossroads between western Europe and the Black sea. In some ways, the country suffered from the constant tramp of military feet marching through, but equally it benefited in culture. It has an amazing music and theatrical tradition that has drawn from many sources to create a unique culture. Then there is the extraordinary language, so memorable and easy on the ear. It was right for the hon. Member for Harrow East to mention our ambassador, Paul Brummell, who is one of the finest representatives of our country, and has done very much for it.

Finally, let me address some misconceptions about Romania, which in some parts of the world—and some parts of the UK media—has had a bad press. I see the Romanian community in my constituency in a different light. I do not see a criminal confederation or a group of people who are causing problems and difficulties for this country. I do not even see people who are unskilled labourers. Instead, I see IT professionals, doctors, dentists, cardiologists—people for whom we should be extremely grateful. I will not be drawn down the slippery slope into the ghastly foul nightmare of Brexit—it is too close to breakfast time even to talk about such horrors. However, we should be grateful that so many skilled and intelligent Romanians have done us the great favour of coming to work in our country.

If any Member would like to try some Romanian food, they should come to Ealing North. They should go straight past Harrow East—obviously, if they see a red light they should not stop; they should wind up the windows and come on down to Ealing North where they will find an extraordinary group of people who are industrious, hardworking, commercially astute and, if I may say so, an absolute credit to their country and my constituency. I am sure that other right hon. and hon. Members would say the same.

Romania is in some ways the victim of its past, which hangs heavy on the shoulders of that emerging nation. There are, however, many signs of hope, democracy and of a new, young and vibrant economy. One of the buildings of the Ceauşescu era had the second largest footprint on the face of the earth after the Pentagon. I remember asking what the planning permission was like, and what had been the consultation with the local community. How exactly did it manage to get built? Was there a proposal under a section 1 agreement? Was there a community infrastructure levy? I was looked at askance and they said, “Ceauşescu did not much bother with community consultation.”

We must consider that that is the recent past, and we spoke to people who had lived through that era. We have moved on from there to a young, hopeful, optimistic, forward-looking Romania, and it is so important that debates such as this take place. I do not wish to be otiose, but we must put on the record how we in this country appreciate, value and support our fellow Europeans in Romania, and hopefully we can work together and go forward. This debate will, I trust, put down a marker for future relations, and I look forward to hearing the Minister respond—indeed, there has never been a time in my parliamentary life when I have not looked forward to hearing the right hon. Gentleman. I know that in his
heart he has heard our words, and that he will feel the same emotion that we feel, which is a huge affection for Romania, the Romanian people, and above all, the Romanian future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I now call the Front-Bench speakers. You have no more than 12 minutes each, because we need to allow time for the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to respond to the debate.

10.23 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I will try to keep my remarks within that time, but perhaps you could allow me some leeway because I was one of the members of the all-party group for Romania who went on the trip, so I have a bit more to say than just summing up the debate.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I ask the hon. Gentleman to keep to the time limit, because it is the same for all the Front-Bench speakers.

Drew Hendry: I have made the request, and I will try to accede to your request, Mr Betts.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important and overdue debate on Romania, and the issues that affect it and its relationship with the UK. For a moment or two I wondered whether this debate was actually about last night’s England-Tunisia game, but let me congratulate England on its win and then move on.

You will notice, Mr Betts, that in honour of this debate I am wearing a tie made from Romanian tartan. I must make a non-financial declaration of interest because since 2012, which predates my election to this House, I have served as honorary consul to Romania for the Highlands and Islands. It has been an absolute pleasure to do that on behalf of my Romanian constituents. Indeed, all hon. Members would find such a job easy, because just as it is the work of an MP to look after their constituents, so is it the work of an honorary consul to look after those people’s interests—there is very little difference. On St Andrew’s day last year, as a result of my work as honorary consul, I was awarded the rank of “cavaler” of the Romanian Republic, for which I was very grateful and honoured.

The hon. Member for Harrow East spoke about the trip of the all-party group, and the range of meetings and visits that we undertook. Brexit and security were common and recurring themes throughout our visit. People acknowledged that the UK had guided Romania through its accession to the EU, for which they were very grateful, but at every single meeting there was also an expression of sadness and some confusion about why the UK is leaving the EU. They also underlined how committed they are to the EU27 and to it continuing.

Mr Hendry: I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East for talking about the publicity that Romanian people get when they work in the nations of the UK. They are clearly not here to claim benefits, and statistics show that they are not causing any problems with crime. Indeed, statistically they are likely to behave better than our own indigenous citizens in the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the importance of Romanian workers in his constituency, and underlined the importance of the NATO relationship. As was pointed out, in fairness it is important to remember that Romania did change sides during the second world war, and it worked with Soviet forces to drive the Nazis back. I also echo the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about opportunities for investment.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) spoke about five reasons to be cheerful, and gave a comprehensive list of some of the reasons for optimism that we should have for Romania. He spoke about his feelings regarding the change since 1989, and recalled standing on the balcony then—I will come back to that in a moment or two. He also underlined Romania’s growing economy, which I will also return to shortly.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the joy of the British Council debates. They were probably the most fun that we had in Romania, working with students of all ages in the British Council, who were a delight to engage with. He rightly raised the issue of corruption and the need to challenge that at every level. Wherever corruption exists, and in whichever political system, it is the duty of all elected Members to raise the issue and point out measures that can be taken to tackle it.

Finally, in an enjoyable speech—well, they were all enjoyable—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) tried to dampen the expectations of tourists by saying how beautiful, unspoiled and untroupled Romania is. He laboured on about how great the food and drink is, all to keep people from going there. He does not want Romania to be ruined by tourism, but he did a fabulous job of attracting people there, which I will try to emulate. The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know, with regard to the long relationship between Britain and Romania, that the Romans used Dacian—Romanian—troops to build Hadrian’s wall; so it is a long connection.

Importantly, the hon. Member for Ealing North spoke, as did other Members, about the bad press given to Romanian people. Romanians in the UK have had a terrible time from the press here; they have been exploited for dramatic and grossly unfair headlines. As the hon. Gentleman said, we should take into account the fact that those people are doing us a favour by working here. We should all pause to think about that. Finally, he talked about how exciting that new, young, hopeful and optimistic country was—those were very good words from the hon. Gentleman.

I want to talk about the visit by the all-party group. We visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and stood on the balcony over Revolution Square. It is an eerie feeling for someone who stands there to realise that they are in the place where Ceausescu made the speech when his dictatorship exploded in real time. Footage can still be found on YouTube of that speech during which things disintegrated—from the orchestrated, disciplined crowd to the ludicrous concessions and promises to raise wages immediately by 20% because he could feel the crowd going away. It followed a pattern that happens when
people see the end coming. We see a leader who is paranoid and unable to trust anyone, disconnected from the people and famed for using wooden language, seeing their support disappear and desperately throwing out uncosted off-the-cuff promises and abandoning long-held strategies to try to stave off the inevitable—but let me get back to Ceaușescu.

How Romania has moved on. Its fast-growing economy has been mentioned. Real GDP growth is in the region of 78%, and the IT sector is undergoing a meteoric rise. It is now 9% to 10% of GDP, and it is so impressive that the London stock exchange is moving its back-office operation back into the EU from Sri Lanka. Romania is a nation of 22 million people with enormous potential for trade and the exchange of cultural ideas. As has been mentioned, the countryside is fabulously beautiful. The cities still bear the scars of the Soviet era, but they are rapidly improving. A lot of interesting development is going on, including in urban areas.

On a visit before I was elected to this House I went to Argeș county. I was struck by the similarities that I saw between the highlands and Argeș. I visited its folk museum and struggled to see the differences between it and the one in my constituency, so similar were they. I am delighted that High Life Highland will undertake an exchange visit this year with the folk museum, to discuss the opportunities for cultural exchange. As to opportunities for Scotland, clearly two sets of welcoming and engaging people are involved, and there are huge opportunities for the massive food and drink industries of Scotland and Romania. There are high-quality products, and opportunities to work together.

In the minute or so I have left I want to reflect on the pleasure of being able to work as the honorary consul in the Highlands and Islands. I thank Mihai Delcea, the Romanian consul general in Edinburgh, and the ambassador, Dan Mihalache, who has been mentioned in the debate, and who has been very supportive. Romanian Scots are well integrated and welcomed into our society. We are glad of them, and their contribution to modern Scotland, as we are of all people who come to work, and to add to our society. Given the shared history that we have with the people of Europe, including Romania, this is a special time to be saying that we appreciate both what they have done in coming to assist our economy and the relations we have with them.

10.35 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important matter to our attention, particularly at this time. One thing that he said slightly perplexed me, and that was his notion of a smooth Brexit. I hope he means something constructive, and that he will vote for such a smooth Brexit in the Chamber when the matter comes before us again tomorrow, so that we will have some sort of accountability in Parliament on moving things forward. I look forward to walking into the same Lobby as the hon. Gentleman on that question.

The UK established its first diplomatic mission in Bucharest in 1803. 77 years before formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said, 1880. Also quite significantly we share royal blood, as Queen Marie of Romania was British by birth and the granddaughter of Queen Victoria; so there is a long historic relationship, certainly through the royal family, and I think that the UK wants a long working relationship. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—it is quicker to call him the hon. Member for the rest of Scotland—Hadrian’s wall was built by Dacian troops. Despite all that, his taking on the role of honorary consul shows what support there is for the people of Romania. The first and second world wars were mentioned, and the fact that Romania changed sides dampened the relationship somewhat; the cold war with Russia also created difficulties. Since those times, as has been said, our excellent ambassador Paul Brummell has done excellent work. He will move on in August, which is a shame, but that is what must happen in such posts. I am sure that he will be replaced by an equally brilliant ambassador, because we need to work with Romania.

The security issue, including in relation to Russia, has been mentioned a number of times. There is also a question of the relationship of Moldova and Romania and how, because of their shared history, the two need to work together. Of course, Moldova is not in the European Union at the moment, although it is striving to join—an issue that it is important for us to consider. We need to see how a bilateral relationship, and a continuing relationship between those two countries, can have a strengthening effect. The involvement of the Russian Army in Transnistria was mentioned. It is still there, so there must be a lot more work to resolve those security issues. Our role will be limited by leaving the EU, but it should not be a reason for us to stop working on the matter. It is all the more reason for us to continue our relationship, and our NATO commitment should allow us to go further in working together. It is hugely important to keep a relationship with Romania and strengthen our role in that regard. I think that in security terms, doing that will stand us in good stead in the region.

As to cultural exchanges, the British Council has done a phenomenal amount of work on cultural exchange for a long time—since 1938. It does good work across the world, and the relationships it builds through education are everlasting; there should be continued support for that.

The role of the Prince of Wales was mentioned, as was the fact that in Romania he has a foundation, which again is about education and supporting what we do. The best way of working with any country is through education. Talking about the role of education overall, I hope that we will allow more students to come in to the UK—qualified in proper universities—who want that sort of support to be able to move forward.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the statistics from the Office for National Statistics. Those statistics are important because they show the number of people who are here, but also the types of work they do for us, and the types of support they give us, to move things forward. They play a huge and fundamental role. He also mentioned the role of the agricultural and seasonal workers who have come across. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has already mentioned the role those
seasonal workers play and the support they give. There is a question for the Minister later about how we support that industry to continue post Brexit and how we deal with that. It is extremely important for us to see how we move forward.

An increasing number of students are coming into our universities, which is very welcome as far as I am concerned. I believe the Government need to look closely at that, to see how we can support more students coming to this country. Our continued relationships will always exist if we have a better relationship through the education of people coming to this country, which will provide a much longer, deeper and further relationship in support of those combined countries working together.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), as always, was right in praising the Minister for his great work. The fulsome praise he gave is well deserved; the Minister is respected across both sides of the House for the work he does. I will not go into whether people should cross traffic lights when they are red. My hon. Friend’s views on the great work done by the Romanian community, and the skills and support they provide to our country in doing it, are noted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) mentioned the significant issue of corruption. For a member of the European Union, corruption must be dealt with. It is extremely important that we do so, and we should work much more strongly on that; if we want to move forward with our relationship, it should be based on anti-corruption. It is crucial to work on that.

It has been an excellent debate, but I will just ask the Minister about the status of Romanians post-Brexit; the status of seasonal workers, whose support is much needed in this country; and also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said, the skilled people who come to support us in our hospitals, on our building and construction sites and on all the sites we have available. As I have already asked, what regional relationship will the Minister ensure with the heritage of Moldovans and the Romanians on security, with the 14th Brigade there? What further work can we do through NATO to secure that relationship and see that that is not in any way a flashpoint for further instability in that area? This has been a good debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East for securing it.

10.43 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate, and for his hard work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Romania. I am grateful for the feedback on the all-party parliamentary group’s visit to Bucharest last month from the hon. Members for Keighley (John Grogan), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), two of whom have spoken today. I am grateful for the contributions of all hon. Members and I will try to respond to all the points raised.

I will say at the outset that I welcome this opportunity to illustrate the strength of the United Kingdom’s relationship with Romania and our commitment to deepening our ties. I am still blushing from the kind words of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), slightly echoed, for which I am thankful, from the Opposition Front Bench. I sense that after the plen of praise from the hon. Member for Ealing North I owe him a sizeable bottle of Romanian wine—a magnum at the very least. We thank him for his special speech this morning on Romania. It was interesting, informative and entertaining, but most importantly it caught the flavour of our relationship with Romania, a sentiment that I think is shared by everyone participating in this debate.

The UK shares a close and long-standing partnership with Romania. Our diplomatic relations stretch back nearly 140 years, spanning two world wars and, most importantly, Romania’s emergence from under the yoke of Communism. Today we have close connections at every level—Ministers, officials and parliamentarians. As we have heard, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales also makes regular visits to Romania, as the highly respected and popular patron of numerous charitable organisations in the country, and as someone who has property there and takes a deep interest in many aspects of the country’s life. I was honoured to accompany him to the funeral of King Michael of Romania last December, joining friends from Romania and around the world to pay tribute to an extraordinary and distinguished monarch who stood up to both communism and fascism in his lifetime. The popularity of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was clearly evident from the warmth of the reception he received from the gathered crowds.

In recent years we have significantly strengthened our security co-operation with Romania to help to address threats in the region that are a concern for Romania and its neighbours. Last year was the busiest in recent memory for our defence engagement. The British military presence was seen on land, in the sea and in the air, and senior British representatives visited on a number of occasions. We plan to maintain that level of engagement in 2018 and beyond.

Last month, four RAF Typhoons returned to Romania to resume air policing activity, and the significantly named HMS Duncan docked at the port of Constanța for the second time this year. In fact, I have been following my Type 45 destroyer namesake around Europe for the best part of 18 months, but always seem to be two days behind or two days ahead. I look forward one day to coinciding with HMS Duncan; they probably have enough Duncan tartan on board, but I will think of something appropriate to give them when I board.

Our successful defence co-operation benefits both Romania and the United Kingdom. It also demonstrates the key role that the UK’s world-class military and security capabilities continue to play in helping to protect our European neighbours. As the Prime Minister has made clear, our commitment to European security will remain steadfast and unconditional after we leave the European Union. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East that I am confident that Russia’s activity will form part of the discussions at the NATO summit next month.

The same is true of our co-operation on law enforcement to tackle serious and organised crime. We have joint operations under way right now to tackle illegal immigration and financial crime. Combating modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking is a key focus of our work together. There are 16 active joint investigations in progress to tackle modern slavery, more than between
any other two EU member states. We also share the hon. Member for Keighley’s concerns about the maintenance of proper efforts to tackle corruption within the Government.

As an outward-looking nation, we also remain committed to supporting peace and security in the rest of the world. I take this opportunity to put on record my concern at recent suggestions by some Romanian politicians that their embassy in Israel might move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. We very much hope that Romania remains with the rest of the EU in believing that this would be unhelpful to the prospects for peace in the region; in any event, it is against the terms of United Nations Security Council resolution 478 of 1980 and others.

Our economic partnership with Romania continues to strengthen. Last year, direct British investment in Romania increased by more than £1.3 billion, and trade in goods between our two countries increased by nearly 5%. That is now worth £3.5 billion to the UK every year, while our trade in services is worth almost £1.8 billion. Again, to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, we have a strong post-Brexit plan for bilateral trade.

Those security and economic ties are important and growing, but it is the daily interaction of our peoples that forms the bedrock of our relationship. Some 5,000 British people now live in Romania and make a positive contribution to the country they have made their home. Our charitable and educational links are particularly strong—numerous British charities make a real difference to the lives of individuals and communities—and this year the British Council celebrates 80 years of promoting education, language and culture in Romania.

Last month, the Office for National Statistics reported that Romanians are now the second largest group of foreign nationals in the UK, as we have heard. They are renowned for their hard work and entrepreneurship, and they make a hugely valuable contribution to our society and to every sector of our economy, be it finance, business, agriculture, engineering, healthcare or education. Many Romanians also choose to study at our universities; they are welcome here and we want them to stay. In the same spirit, we want to encourage greater tourism to Romania among UK citizens, but perhaps not for them to traipse through the virgin forests we have heard mentioned this morning.

Jim Shannon: The Mayor of Constanţa said he would like to see more tourism contacts, particularly involving airlines. Does the Minister have any thoughts about how we can help him to achieve his goal and therefore, I believe, build greater economic ties between our two countries?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that in building the sort of bilateral relations that we want with all the EU27, we will see a cross-Whitehall approach to encouraging increased activity in all sorts of areas, including tourism. I very much hope that the afterlife, as it were, will deliver what the hon. Gentleman seeks.

In common with other EU citizens in the UK, Romanians want clarity on their rights after the UK leaves the European Union, which is why the Government have made safeguarding citizens’ rights a high priority in our negotiations. We are confident that the agreement we have now reached with the EU provides that citizens with the certainty that they need. Earlier this year, working closely with the Romanian embassy, the Foreign Office organised two widely publicised events, in London and Manchester, for the Romanian diaspora to explain the agreement reached on citizens’ rights. We want to ensure that Romanians feel safe and welcome here, and we hope to run more such events in the future.

Looking to that future, particularly after Brexit, we are working with the Romanian Government to develop a new strategic partnership that looks far beyond March 2019. We welcome their commitment to our future relationship and look forward to strengthening our collaboration across a range of issues, including foreign policy, trade, security, culture, education and defence.

I was specifically asked if there have been any discussions about the coming Romanian EU presidency. I can tell hon. Members that we are already working closely with Romanian colleagues, and the British embassy in Bucharest has been discussing Romania’s developing plans for the presidency with Government officials for some time now. On 8 June, Lord Callanan, the Minister of State for Exiting the EU, met the Romanian Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry for Romanians Abroad to discuss preparations for the presidency in the context of our exit from the EU. We also maintain excellent relations with the Romanian embassy in London, and we very much value and appreciate our working relationship and the attention it pays to us, which I sense is endorsed by all hon. Members here.

Many elements help to strengthen the partnership between the UK and Romania. The successful collaboration between our Government Departments, Ministers, parliamentarians and armed forces are all essential components of that good relationship. They are all underpinned and reinforced by the relationships between our peoples—the British citizens living in Romania and the Romanians living here, whose rights we are working hard to protect. We should be proud of the vibrant relationship between our two countries, which the Government, and I personally, intend to nurture and strengthen in the years ahead.

10.55 am

Bob Blackman: I thank every hon. Member who has participated in this welcome debate—particularly the Minister, who was widely praised even before he spoke. It is important that we send out a strong message to our citizens in the United Kingdom, to Romanian citizens in the United Kingdom and to our friends in Romania that we want a strong bilateral arrangement and relations going forward and that people who have chosen to come and live in our country are welcome. We congratulate and thank them for the service they give us and we want to make sure that they continue to contribute to our economy. Equally, we want to make sure that we stand shoulder to shoulder with Romania in our defence relations and, looking forward, in our trade relations and in tourism, even if that tourism is promoted by Pound Associates, that well-known travel agent in Ealing North.

It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. We have had a warm and welcome debate, with speakers from across the nations of the United
Kingdom, which demonstrates the great force and the great opportunities around Romania. We are also grateful for those Romanian footballers who have come to our country, including, notably, two who came and played for Tottenham and demonstrated their great abilities on one or two occasions to overcome the other team that plays in north London.

It is a pleasure to sum up the debate, and I look forward to the various activities in the rest of the year to promote the excellent relations between our two countries. We can look forward to a solid future.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered UK-Romanian relations.

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**Rail Services: Hassocks**

10.58 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rail services in Hassocks.

I welcome the opportunity to raise the subject of the rail services provided for villagers in Hassocks in my constituency, and for others who use the station there, which is on the Brighton main line and which offers Southern, Thameslink and Gatwick Express services. Hon. Members may wonder why I am talking about rail services to a village. Although it has a population of only 7,700 people—making it the largest settlement in my constituency—Hassocks is nevertheless the 10th busiest rail station in west Sussex and is used by many people who do not live in Hassocks itself. It is a commuter village.

Many people move to Hassocks specifically because of the rail links that it provides to London and other places. In fact, 1.3 million passengers a year use Hassocks station. Therefore, my first and key point—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has taken it on board, because he very generously met me to discuss this issue before the new timetable was introduced last month—is that this is not a small issue. A large number of people use the rail service from Hassocks in my constituency, and the Minister knows that they are very angry indeed. They have put up with two years of disruption because of the problems with the Southern service and the London Bridge upgrade. They fully accept that the London Bridge upgrade will ultimately be of benefit to passengers, but they are certainly not seeing that at the moment. Just as it looked as though we might be moving towards a steadier state for rail services in West Sussex, which over the past two years have been absolutely dismal, we have serious disruption again.

This all started with the introduction of the new timetable last month. I should say straightaway that I fully appreciate that the new timetable provides more peak trains to Victoria from Hassocks and the same number to and from London Bridge—technically; I will come to the actuality shortly. Theoretically there are more such services, but—here is the “but”—there are no longer any direct services to Clapham Junction, the busiest rail station in Europe, from Hassocks. Despite the size of the village and the numbers of people commuting from there, the direct services to Clapham Junction have simply been withdrawn, and I am talking not about the disrupted timetable, but about the new timetable, which was meant to offer an improved service to everyone.

Four peak-time morning trains to Clapham Junction have been removed, and Govia Thameslink Railway admits that three of those journeys will now be slower by up to 10 minutes because of the need for my constituents to change services. Six peak-time return trains from Clapham Junction to Hassocks have been removed, and GTR admits that four of the journeys will be slower by up to 10 minutes. GTR has told me that it appreciates that “passengers will need to change trains,” but “the journey time is only increasing by an average of 7 minutes.”
Commuters dispute that: they say that changes at Gatwick or East Croydon are rarely quick or easy, because of overcrowding. I know that GTR is giving figures based on a four-minute change time at Gatwick. I defy the Minister, GTR executives or anyone else reliably to be able to change at Gatwick at peak time, even if the trains were operating properly, based on only a four-minute window.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for the work that he is doing. Many of us in West Sussex are working together on this; it is a huge problem across the county. On his particular point about a changeover time of four minutes and with crowded platforms and mass disruption, commuters in my constituency are very concerned about the safety aspect. I am sure that that is a concern for his commuters as well.

Nick Herbert: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. We have indeed been working together in West Sussex and we have been working closely with our right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who is also very concerned about the disruption to services on the line. We are all concerned about the uneconomic interchange times and the safety implications, the implications for disabled passengers and so on. It is no good producing figures that show a theoretical benefit or not much of a change or not much of a problem for commuters, because of course it is actually very disruptive for people to have to change when they had a direct service before. These are busy working people. They often cannot get a seat once when they have changed. Their working patterns are disrupted, and they are just very irritated by the claim that somehow the service is nearly as good as it was before. It really is not.

There is a mismatch between demand and train routes. Gatwick Express trains, which stop only at Victoria, are relatively empty, whereas Thameslink trains have been severely overcrowded. I have raised before with the Minister whether it makes sense for Gatwick Express trains not to stop at the busiest station in Europe, Clapham Junction. If they did, that would offer more choice to people flying to and from Gatwick. The demand that those trains run direct from Gatwick to Victoria is problematic anyway, but it is certainly disadvantaging my constituents at the moment.

The Minister will tell me that only 9% of journeys in relation to Hassocks are to, from or through Clapham Junction. It sounds like very few when we hear that only 9% of my commuting constituents are affected, but actually it is 9% of a large number. It is 9.45%, to be precise, of the nearly 595,000 journeys that are being made to London. That means that more than 56,000 single journeys a year from Hassocks to Clapham Junction, in either direction, have now been withdrawn, in terms of the direct service, so that is not a small impact. It is impacting on the village, and people are very upset about it. Hassocks is a growing village—the number of houses will increase by one third in Hassocks alone, never mind the surrounding area—so to pick on one of the biggest stations in West Sussex and withdraw entirely the direct service to Clapham Junction simply does not make sense. I would therefore be very grateful if I could repeat to the Minister the request that I have made to him, to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to GTR and to Network Rail, in so far as it is a matter for that organisation: will they please reconsider the new timetable, which has withdrawn what was an essential service for a large number of my constituents?

All this would be one thing, and I might not even have raised it in this Chamber, if it were not for the fact that these are theoretical new services anyway, because the disruption that has resulted from the new timetable has worsened the service not just for the commuters who have seen their service withdrawn, but for hundreds—no, thousands—of others. Frankly, the service since the introduction of the new timetable has been completely intolerable. I said at the beginning of the debate that my constituents were angry about it—they really are angry. This disruption is happening on a daily basis. It is deeply ironic that before the new timetable was introduced, GTR told me:

“We hope that with the introduction of this timetable, we will be in a position to provide...much more reliable services for all passengers travelling on our network.”

That would produce a very hollow laugh indeed from my constituents. The Minister knows that there has been widespread withdrawal, cancellation and delay of services.

The important thing for the Minister to note is that the situation is not getting better; in fact, it is just as bad as it was when the new timetable was first introduced. In the week before the timetable change, to 19 May, there were 18 train cancellations. That was a “normal” service. “Normal” service in West Sussex appeared to mean that my commuters had to accept that level of cancellations. Can people imagine an airline being run on the same basis? But never mind; there were “just” 18 cancellations in that week. In the first week of the new timetable, 245 trains were cancelled, and I am talking about trains to and from Hassocks. In the second week, there were 267 cancellations, in the third week 312 and in the fourth week 290. We are now in the fifth week and still nearly 300 trains a week are being cancelled. Might we have expected that after one month of the new interim timetable, which is resulting in services being withdrawn altogether, there might be some improvement? I am afraid not.

On Monday morning I received an email from a despairing constituent, Mr James Read, who lives in Hurstpierpoint. He said:

“I feel I must write to express my dismay at the current situation which appears to somehow deteriorate further everyday. This morning for example, I have never seen so many people waiting for a London train on the platforms at Hassocks. This morning, the 0623 was virtually full before it reached Hassocks. Then there were additional stops at Hayward’s Heath and Three Bridges to compound matters. It is totally unacceptable for people to be standing on a train service at 0630!”

I agree with that. I have a simple question for the Minister: when will this shambles come to an end? We are now four weeks on and it continues to be appalling.

I have here a timetable for rail services from Brighton and Hassocks in 1903, well over a century ago. The fastest of three direct trains from Hassocks to London Bridge took just one hour and 17 minutes. Those were steam trains. Theoretically, we now have direct services from Hassocks to London Bridge that are 23 minutes faster, but the reality is that we have a completely...
unreliable service. My constituents would be grateful to be transported back to the days of 1905, when they had three reliable steam trains that took them to London every single morning, compared to the chaotic, shambolic, disrupted, withdrawn and cancelled services that they are facing now.

What will be done about this? There is the issue of redress. I am grateful to GTR for at last recognising that tickets that are valid on one of the services should be passported to the others. I specifically asked for that and am grateful that it has been introduced. If a passenger has a ticket for a Southern service that is cancelled, they should be allowed to use it on a Thameslink or Gatwick Express service, or whichever service is available.

Then there is the issue of compensation. Of course, we must compensate passengers, but the compensation system is simply not good enough. It is not direct enough, immediate enough or sharp enough. It is too complicated for constituents to use. It just increases their irritation even more. We need a modern, sharper form of compensation system that is better than delay repay, so that the rail operating companies feel real pain when they are providing a shambolic and shoddy service like this, and passengers are compensated on a much more immediate basis. We need that not just because it would be fair to customers, but because it would introduce greater accountability.

Who will be accountable for this shambles? We have seen the resignation of Charles Horton, the chief executive of GTR, but what about Network Rail’s responsibility for this matter? It has admitted that it has some responsibility for the problems with Thameslink services, because of its failure to deliver in the north, which meant that it did not have enough staff to manage the new timetable. GTR says that one of the reasons it was in such trouble is that it was not given enough time to introduce the new timetable. The blame game is being played a lot. Who is being held accountable at Network Rail for this shambles? Yes, other projects may have played a lot. Who is being held accountable at Network Rail for this shambles?

In conclusion, my constituents in Hassocks are paying in excess of £5,000 a year for their season tickets. They rely on these rail services. I would, therefore, be grateful if the Minister would, first, look again at the question of whether direct services to Clapham Junction from Hassocks can be restored and, secondly, if he can tell us when normal, reliable services are likely to be restored.

I am grateful to the Minister for his attention to these problems, and I know how hard he has been working on them. His door has been open to us, and he has been receptive to the points we have been making. I certainly attach no blame to him or his colleagues. He has been badly let down indeed. I am sorry to address him in such tones, but it is important that I do so, because it is important for him to understand just how angry our constituents are now about this perpetually bad service and how despairing they are that there seems to be no end to it. They just want a normal, reliable rail service. In the 21st century, is that really too much to ask?
assure him that it is the Department’s No. 1 priority to ensure that his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) get the rail services to which they have every right to feel entitled as soon as possible.

He is under the impression that services have not been improving in recent days. I am disappointed to hear that. I will look into the statistics and the picture he painted of performance to and from Hassocks. Passengers travelling on those services already should have started to see improvement in their performance since GTR started cancelling services in advance, rather than on the day.

During the week beginning 28 May—some time ago now—there were several days with just three morning services from Hassocks to London Bridge. The other scheduled services were cancelled on the day, meaning that passengers could not plan ahead. Last week, by contrast, there were no on-the-day cancellations and five services ran in each morning peak period. I grant that performance is still far from being at the level that my right hon. Friend or we in the Department would find satisfactory, but I hope that passengers seeing that change feel that improvement is starting to happen. It must now accelerate and that is the priority for the Department.

On the Hassocks to Victoria route there are still too many delays. I should add that in the morning peak last week, 12 services ran each day, compared with the seven scheduled services before the timetable change. Even if there is much more room for improvement on the Victoria line, even there we are starting to see things move in the right direction.

Network Rail and GTR are urgently developing and delivering plans to do more to reduce the disruption, and to give passengers the greatest possible certainty of train services so that they can better plan ahead. As I have mentioned, GTR is removing services from its timetable in advance, rather than on the day, and reducing weekend services to pre-May timetable levels. It is now updating journey plans on Fridays with the information about which services are being cancelled for the following week being all loaded up there and then, so that passengers can get a sense of what the travel patterns will be like for the coming week. That should bring about a more stable service than we have seen in recent weeks and will be in place, to answer my right hon. Friend’s question, until a full replanning of driver resourcing can take place. GTR also aims to publish an amended timetable across the whole network. Once that is in place, the promised improvements of the May timetable will be introduced incrementally, rather than as a big bang, to reduce the risk of further disruption.

Let me turn to the questions about the future timetable, once we are over this difficult period of disruptions following the implementation of the timetable. When it is fully implemented, the new timetable will deliver improvements to as many passengers as possible while balancing the competing and often contradictory demands of different passenger groups.

As my right hon. Friend noted, peak-time services from Hassocks no longer stop at Clapham Junction. That is because all peak services between Hassocks and Victoria are Gatwick Express trains coming from Brighton, which cannot stop between Gatwick airport and Victoria. However, there can be a single change at Gatwick airport. We can examine his view that a four-minute positive interchange was an unrealistic ambition; I will certainly go back to Network Rail and GTR to see whether four minutes is a realistic interchange time. However, if we assume for a moment that it is possible to interchange in that time, Hassocks passengers can make the journey to Clapham Junction with an average journey time that is roughly the same as before the timetable change, with some journeys being faster and, I grant, with some being slower.

It may be helpful if I explain the reasons behind the change. Since the end of the industrial action to which my right hon. Friend referred in his remarks, the main cause of disruption on the Southern network has been trains and train staff travelling on different lines during the day. That has meant that when disruption has occurred, it has often spread rapidly across the network because if a driver or a train were caught up in disruption on one route that can impact very quickly on their availability for the route on which they are next meant to be working.

The new timetable keeps trains and train staff working on the same route throughout the day, containing any disruption on that specific route. In addition, work has been done so that the timing of services does not conflict with that of other services on the network. This work has included separating Gatwick Express services and Southern services on the Brighton main line.

The net result is that Hassocks now receives a consistent four Gatwick Express trains per hour on the route from Brighton to Victoria during the peak, and two Southern trains per hour from Littlehampton during the off-peak. Previously, as my right hon. Friend knows, Hassocks was served by a combination of Southern and Gatwick Express services coming from Brighton or Littlehampton at all times.

I appreciate my right hon. Friend’s point that a considerable number of passengers are still being affected, but I believe that they are now in a position where they are able to choose between Southern and Gatwick Express services. Passengers from Hassocks will benefit from the performance benefits that will come in time from the full separation of Gatwick Express and Southern services.

I also emphasise that the vast majority of passengers travelling to London from Hassocks are being well served by the timetable change. None the less, I recognise that 9.45%, or somewhere under 10%, of weekday journeys represents a significant number of my right hon. Friend’s constituents who use services from Hassocks. However, it is also worth remembering that more than 90% of passengers using Hassocks are going to Victoria or are on Thameslink services. Overall, connections from Hassocks into London are much improved.

Hassocks now receives 12 direct services to Victoria in the morning peak, compared with seven before the timetable change. This provides a significant capacity increase for those passengers going to Victoria. As this is a Gatwick Express route during the peaks, it is run with new trains that have air conditioning, wi-fi and power sockets. On average, the journey from Hassocks to Victoria in the morning used to take more than an hour. Now it takes, on average, 51 minutes, which is
significantly better than the amount of time that services took in 1905, the timetable for which my right hon. Friend produced and referred to.

Nick Herbert: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Before he experiences the fate of politicians and other public figures in Sussex who have particularly infuriated us and is burnt in effigy, may I ask him to reconsider his comment that services are “much improved”?

I think what he meant was that they might be much improved when the new timetable is finally introduced and works properly, but he cannot say, and nobody can say, that the current level of service is much improved.

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. I prefaced all my comments by saying that this was about what would happen once we are over this hump—the current difficulties—and once the timetable is fully bedded in and working to the levels that it should. Of course my right hon. Friend is right and I repeat what I said earlier: there has been improvement, as I hope he acknowledges, but there is significant room for further improvement, so that services are of the standard that his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham have a right to expect.

On average, the journey times for trains into Victoria from Hassocks will be reduced by 10 minutes in the morning, when the service is operating at the level it should be operating at.

Jeremy Quin: I appreciate that there is an ongoing inquiry. Will my hon. Friend confirm whether this situation is attributable purely to the retraining of the drivers, so that when that training is concluded the new timetable will operate properly, or are there other issues to be got to grips with as well? As I say, I appreciate that there is an inquiry ongoing, but I would be most grateful for any light that he can throw on this situation.

Joseph Johnson: Yes, the sheer magnitude of the timetable change affecting GTR, which is one of the biggest changes that the railway industry has ever seen, and the late delivery of the timetable as a consequence have meant that GTR was substantially behind where it should have been on driver training and on getting in place all the appropriate train diagrams. That driver training and reorganisation work, which should have been completed in time for 20 May, is now being done at pace. Once that has worked its way through, we anticipate being able to move progressively back to the full May timetable.

There are the same number of services going from Hassocks to London Bridge as there were before the timetable change. I grant that for a temporary period Hassocks will receive fewer peak services to Blackfriars compared with the situation before the timetable change. However, that is a temporary result of the rephasing of the timetable and this route will receive an extra service each hour from December this year. Average journey times to Blackfriars and London Bridge are now between five and 10 minutes shorter than before, providing passengers with quicker direct access to London Bridge, Blackfriars, the City, Farringdon and St Pancras.

The new Thameslink service also offers passengers different options for getting to their final station. For example, people who interchange at Clapham Junction for Waterloo will instead be able to interchange at London Bridge for Waterloo East. The opening of the Elizabeth line through Farringdon in December will offer further journey opportunities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs mentioned compensation. As ever, passengers are encouraged to apply to their train operator for delay repay compensation for affected journeys. We are seeing increased take-up of that compensation, as awareness of it and the ease with which people can access it grow. We have also announced a special compensation scheme for GTR passengers. It is to be funded by the rail industry and it will ensure that regular rail customers receive appropriate redress for the disruption they have experienced. I encourage passengers to apply to GTR for delay repay compensation. GTR operates the scheme for all of its passengers and under it passengers can claim compensation for each delay of more than 15 minutes, whatever the cause of the delay.

I conclude by thanking my right hon. Friend for bringing this subject to Westminster Hall. It is an important subject and it is absolutely right that his constituents get the services they deserve as rapidly as possible. I remind the House that in time the vast majority of passengers will end up being well served by this timetable change, once it has bedded in. Those travelling to Victoria from Hassocks will have an extra five additional services during the morning peak; for those travelling on Thameslink, journey times will be between five and 10 minutes quicker than before. In time, I hope that he will agree that rail services into Hassocks will be much improved once those services are fully bedded in.

11.30 am

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Geothermal Energy

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Before I call Helen Goodman, let me say that Members may, in view of the Ascot weather, remove items of clothing as they deem appropriate.

2.30 pm  
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the potential for geothermal energy resources in the UK.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. I am pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate on what is a huge carbon-free energy resource for this country. I hope we can use the debate to highlight the potential of the resource and to encourage the Minister to act, so that we fully realise the opportunities.

In Britain, geothermal energy comes in two forms: that which occurs naturally in the geological structure in some places, and that in old mine workings. I first became aware of that when I was a trustee of Auckland castle, which sits on the Butterknowle fault. At that time, the trustees looked—I understand they are still looking—at the possibility of using the geothermal energy there to heat the castle, and perhaps for a district heating scheme.

The Butterknowle fault runs across my constituency. It is a geological feature where coal was mined from the time of the Romans to the mid-20th century. Now the coal is exhausted but scope for geothermal has been discovered. At a depth of 500 metres, the heat is 30°C, and at 1.5 km there are rocks of about 73°C. It would be really good to exploit that, particularly because some of the villages on the fault—Evenwood and Cockfield—are off the gas grid, meaning that fuel bills and, in turn, fuel poverty are high. I met a woman whose winter oil bill was £3,000. I know that such a system exists in Southampton, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who was the leader of the council there when the project began—indeed, I think he was instrumental in beginning it—will tell us more in his Front-Bench speech about how that works. Maps show that there are considerable areas of the country where it is a possible source of energy.

The second kind of geothermal energy we have is warm water in old mine workings. At about 30°C, the water is generally not so hot, but it is nearer the surface and therefore easier to extract. The Coal Authority has completed maps of 23,000 former collieries and has a very good understanding of the geology, the engineering and the feasibility of such schemes. The former mine workings are treated as a £3 billion liability for British taxpayers, because they must be kept safe, but they could be turned into a massive stream of income for them instead. Durham University’s Durham Energy Institute, in particular Dr Charlotte Adams and Professor Jon Cluyts, has done, and continues to do, a lot of work on this, and it has shown that the scale of the resource is phenomenal. Currently in this country, 80% of people heat their homes with gas. Durham University believes that the deep geothermal—the geological—could provide 100 GW of power, which is 16% of the electricity we consume.

Turning to the mine workings, a quarter of homes in this country sit on the old coalfields—7 million homes that could use mine-water heat instead of gas. In business terms, that represents a business or a sector with an annual turnover of about £2.5 billion and profits of £750 million. The net present value of the resource is £72 billion—I am using these numbers because I know that the Minister is financially literate and will understand their significance—and the net present value of the profits is £7.2 billion, so the Minister should look to turn the current £3 billion liability into a £72 billion asset.

Furthermore, the heat source is virtually carbon-free. It is estimated that enabling a quarter of the homes in this country to move over to it would save between 10 and 15 million tonnes of carbon a year. The current warm water would supply heat for 100 years, but if pumping technology were introduced to recycle the heat, that period could be extended almost indefinitely.

I am told that by Durham University, which says that to meet our next carbon budget, it is essential to decarbonise heat. The Government’s current strategy is to do that by shifting people from gas to electricity heating, but electricity generation is only about 35% efficient, whereas I understand that for geothermal the figure is 75% or 80%, so the loss during production, transmission and distribution is much less. Geothermal would, therefore, be a much better route to pursue to hit our carbon targets. Some 40% of our carbon emissions are produced by fuel for heating, so if we decarbonised a quarter of the country there would be a reduction in our carbon emissions of 10%. That would be fantastic. It represents a really large reduction that is really worth having, and it would give us more flexibility in other areas of life.

There are considerable other policy advantages of using the mines in this way. First, this source of energy would improve energy security. Geothermal energy is not intermittent, unlike wind and solar, and it would reduce our dependency on unstable foreign regimes.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know if my hon. Friend sees Iceland as an unstable foreign regime, but another idea is to have an interconnector through to that country, which gains enormous power from geothermal energy. Would my hon. Friend say that that fits into her debate in some way?

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend has just inserted it into the debate, so it obviously fits. Yes, that is a country that is already using the resource, as are others, and I will come on to that in a moment.

As I said at the outset, there is significant fuel poverty in some parts of the country and using geothermal energy is a way of tackling that. The sector could also be a source of jobs, especially in the former coalfield communities, which still suffer economic decline and need regeneration—in 2004, the Department of Trade and Industry estimated that it could create a million jobs. That is a very big number, and it might not be as many as that. If we consider it, however, with the 300,000 jobs in the oil and gas sector, we can see that it is obviously a significant number of jobs. Moreover, the skills and supply chains used in the oil and gas sector
would be similar to what is required for geothermal. It would provide a useful transition for those businesses as the North sea declines.

Fourthly, geothermal could help to improve food security. That warm water would facilitate horticulture in parts of the country where it does not currently exist. Fifthly, mines can be used to store heat and therefore to balance power across the grid. We would be developing an industry that could be a source of exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr. Drew) suggests importing heat from Iceland. I do not know whether an interconnector across the very deep waters of the north Atlantic is feasible, but I know that in many areas of renewables, this country has done a lot of innovation and research and then not seen through the development. In the case of wind, we did a lot of the basic science and initial work, but the industry has flourished more in Denmark, Norway and Germany than it has here. We must stop making that mistake. We need a different approach for geothermal, because we could be exporting engineering services for geothermal.

Another advantage is that there is no nuclear waste with geothermal, which compares well with some of the other power projects being promoted. It also does not produce the environmental damage that fracking produces, yet in the Government’s 160-page clean growth strategy, there is not a mention of geothermal, which compares well with some of the engineering services for geothermal.

The strategy says that the Government wish to ensure that they can “deliver affordable energy for households...decarbonising ‘harder to reach’ parts of the UK economy”, particularly heating. The strategy says that it is important to have “concerted joined up working” across Departments. It wants to see innovation to minimise costs. I agree with all those things, and geothermal is a policy area where they could be put into practice.

I know the Minister well. When she puts her mind to something, she is a very effective operator. She is a formidable figure. Officials in her Department have told me that they have found her leadership on renewables inspirational. I know she is not a paper shuffler. I want her to pick up the baton and run with it, because I have confidence that if she wanted to, she could make a difference here. The time to do that is now, using the skills and know-how of the petroleum industry. I am going to give her a few practical suggestions as to what I would expect to see in a policy for geothermal.

First, the basic science is strong, but we need more demonstration projects. The Coal Authority needs more resources to do those, as well as to provide advice for commercial actors.

Secondly, in the medium term we should probably have regulation and a licensing system that would bring in money for the taxpayer. For now, it would be sensible to extend the contract for difference to heat. At the moment, it operates just for electricity. In the Netherlands, the Government introduced a form of risk insurance. In five years, the scale of their geothermal sector has doubled.

Thirdly and finally, my concern is that we should see reform to planning and building regulations. The resource is being lost and opportunities are being wasted. One of the studies that Durham University did was into some old mine workings in Spennymoor in my constituency. It found that it would be feasible to have a district heating system for a new development of 300 houses. The local authority had no powers to require the house builder to consider, let alone implement, sustainability factors or renewable energy sources.

We all know that the large national house builders want to minimise risk and maximise profits, which, on being interpreted, means that they are lazy and greedy. They are not going to innovate unless they are required to do so. It has been suggested to me that we need a return to code 6 for sustainable homes. That gave us targets for achieving carbon neutrality in house building. Just as with the transition from oil and gas, the time to reform the building regulations is now. We are trying to build a lot of houses, so now is the time to raise the standards.

Everybody knows that retrofitting is more costly, so this is the moment to raise the quality of the housing stock for the next 100 years. We are in danger of making exactly the same mistake that was made after world war two, when a lot of prefabricated buildings were built. If we are going to build a lot, we need to build high-quality buildings for the long term, not the slums of the future. I suggest to the Minister that she organises a seminar for the national house builders and experts in the field to educate them. Will she write to or meet her colleague, the Minister for Housing, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), to persuade him that he needs to incorporate the changes into the building regulations? He is going to make big changes to the building regulations, so he may as well do a proper, comprehensive job.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this debate. On the issue of asking the Minister to try to convene a seminar, does she agree that in doing that, it would be an idea to have mapped out the most productive areas and the likely benefit to be derived? That would act as a harbinger for extracting the maximum amount of benefit for the minimum amount of input.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We need two maps. We need the map of the geological possibilities and the map of the former coalfields. The Coal Authority has done a lot of work on that. I am sure it has shared that with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but we need to give these things more currency than they have at the moment. It is also important that we have a national scheme. We do not want a system where builders are required to explore the possibility in, for the sake of argument, Derbyshire, but not in Norfolk. That will mean that they are encouraged to go and build in Norfolk, but not in Derbyshire. That is why we need a national approach. We need to go beyond a strategy to having a plan.

I thank Jeremy Crooks from the Coal Authority and members of the Durham Energy Institute and Durham County Council’s planning department. They have all helped me understand this important issue.

2.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)
on bringing forward this important debate. She brings incredible energy and enthusiasm to any subject matter, whether it is here in Westminster Hall or the Chamber, and I thank her for that.

To digress slightly, hailing from Strangford and having lived there for all but four years of my life, my initial interest in this subject began with the sight of the UK’s first SeaGen tide turbine, which harnessed nature’s resources. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland referred to that with regard to geothermal resources, but in a passing way I want to explain why the first SeaGen tide turbine was interesting to me. I live on the edge of Strangford lough. At the entrance of the lough, at the narrows, the tides rush with an almost nervous but very strong force. The SeaGen project was able to harness that energy. My interest in that came about when I was wearing my former hat, a long time ago, on Ards and North Down Borough Council.

The world’s first commercial-scale tidal turbine was commissioned in Northern Ireland’s Strangford lough in July 2008. The project had two 600 kW turbines and required a total investment of £12 million. The energy produced equalled the power required by 1,500 households annually. That milestone indicated the completion of the demonstration phase of the project. We recognised that if natural resources were there, we could generate energy from them.

The subject of today’s debate—geothermal resources—is clearly slightly different, but the SeaGen project, right on my doorstep, gave me a real interest in this area. I was, and am, passionate about that project because I saw its potential. That interest led me to enjoy the research for today’s debate and learning that in Iceland—some hon. Members have intervened along these lines—geothermal energy provides around two-thirds of the country’s primary energy demand. I am not sure about running a pipe from Iceland to here, or whatever the proposal may be. Nothing in this world is impossible, but whether it is cost effective is the issue. However, Iceland’s achievement is incredible and less reliance on fossil fuels can be only a good thing.

It is time that we started to look at those things. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland has generated the core of interest in the debate to enable us to focus on it and give the Minister time to prepare a detailed and comprehensive response, which I am sure the Minister and her staff are doing at this moment. We can then rely less on insecure middle-eastern trade and influence, and stand on our own two feet.

If someone drives a car or lives in the countryside their petrol and diesel bills will be bigger than most. Some people heat their house with oil. We do not have to worry about that much at this time of year, but at other times we do, and the price of oil is extreme. The countries that resource and supply oil will have a meeting this week, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) mentioned, and there is some indication that the price may be reduced. The fact is that we are experiencing the highest oil prices for some four years. When I go to fill up with diesel on a Saturday morning at 131.9p per litre, that gives me an idea of it. Not too long ago, it was under 107.9p, so that is quite an increase.

The Library briefing paper indicated that the geothermal potential of the UK was investigated by a programme funded by the UK Government and the European Commission that ran from 1977-94. It identified the key heat flow areas of potential in the UK and, in May 2012, a paper by consultants Sinclair Knight Merz in association with the Renewable Energy Association, an industry trade body, argued that geothermal power could provide 20% of the UK’s electricity and all of the UK’s heat demand. Subsequent reports may have put the figures lower, but the common theme is that there is scope for further investigation of how we can harness geothermal potential in a cost-effective way.

I understand that in Northern Ireland we have some potential for geothermal interest—perhaps in North Antrim and Mid Ulster. There was also talk at one time of potential for development along South Down. I understand that this is not directly the Minister’s responsibility, but has any contact been made with the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is unfortunately not working at the moment in the way that it should, to see what part Northern Ireland can play in the strategic policy for the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

In 2017, a study estimated that the UK theoretically had enough resource available to surpass easily all UK energy demand in 2015. However, the amount that was technically available was much smaller than the theoretical resource, and recovery would depend on depths drilled and areas targeted. Although there might be some potential there, the costs of extraction might be such that doing so would not be financially feasible. Can the Minister throw any light on how we can play our part in Northern Ireland?

I am not an engineer—far from it. If a hammer cannot sort something out, I do not know what can, but that is just me being the DIY man around our house. When it comes to doing simple things, if it is easy and a hammer can do it, I am your man. When it comes to the concerns highlighted in today’s debate, it is our duty to commission reports from those who have the ability, who are experts and who know what they are talking about. I believe that renewable energy resources are very much worthy of investigation. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland is really saying, “Let’s look at that—let’s see what we can do.” Is it possible to provide 20% of the electricity needs of the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? If we can, it will be time well spent, and I support the hon. Lady in trying to achieve that goal.

I support the Government and the Minister in their pledge of £300 million to invest in district heat networks over the next few years as an important way of ascertaining the best way towards a self-sustaining ability to harness a power source that can address the entire UK’s needs. The £300 million seems like a lot, but when spread across the United Kingdom it might not be as much as we would think. However, if it initiates interest in the subject, it is something we should try to do.

In conclusion, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland on introducing the debate. I look forward to the speech of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and to the Minister’s response. We in Northern Ireland want to be part of the strategy, and are keen to see how we can play our part to make that happen. I am keen to see
how we can take advantage of nature’s best, and perhaps nature’s worst, for energy provision. If we can do that, I think it will be time well spent.

2.57 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans—with your strong and long Welsh history, I hope you may even know the community that I will talk about today.

Geothermal energy has tremendous potential, and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing the debate. It was very interesting to hear her informed view on why such projects can be of huge benefit to Durham, and to the whole of the UK. I will focus my remarks mainly on the Caerau project in my constituency.

Bridgend County Borough Council, which serves two thirds of my constituency, has commissioned a survey to ascertain whether water held in the former Caerau colliery, in the Llynfi valley, could provide a sufficient heat source for a project. If the survey results are positive, there are proposals for a geothermal energy project to generate energy for nearly 1,000 homes across the Llynfi valley. That could provide safe, reliable and cost-effective heat and build a green energy industry in the heart of the south Wales coalfields.

If the project is successful, that will catapult Caerau to the forefront of the UK’s energy revolution. The project is a clear example of effective collaborative working, and I pay tribute to the Labour leadership of Bridgend County Borough Council, including Councillor Huw David, the leader, and the Welsh Labour Government. They have worked tirelessly with the private sector to secure the necessary EU funding for the scheme to get the go-ahead.

At its core, this is about moving towards a clean energy mix that the UK can rely on, but it is about much more than that in my opinion. Across the coalfields, many communities are still feeling the effects of the end of the mining industry. At its peak, the Caerau colliery once employed more than 2,400 workers. In the village, the working-age population today is just over 4,000. The end of the industry was disastrous for that community. Even today, the unemployment rate remains stubbornly above the national average. Those communities need funding, employment and industry. Geothermal energy projects can provide that much-needed injection.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for coalfield communities and the representative of one of Wales’s most prominent coalfield areas, and this is an issue that I care deeply about. Geothermal energy is an opportunity to help regenerate our coalfields, and we must grasp that opportunity to build on the history and tradition of our collieries with a new industry that is clean, safe, and can provide energy and jobs where they are needed.

Of course, such projects have their benefits, but we must take care to listen to those who live close to the collieries and ensure that they have as much support from local residents as possible. In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland has already said, we must ensure that local residents get the potentially lucrative benefits of the projects, and reap part of the economic and social rewards the developments bring, whether that be through employment opportunities, community funding or receiving a benefit through their energy bills.

I know from speaking to residents in Caerau that there is a lot of optimism and promise for the project, but there is some concern too. It is vital that residents are informed as much as possible about the positives that such projects can bring. Through the design, construction and maintenance process, they must be fully engaged and represented. Their opinions should take priority and it is they who should be the focus of such projects.

Needless to say, geothermal energy is not the silver bullet for solving our energy insecurity as a whole and can only form a part of our future energy mix. It will come as no surprise to the Minister if I take the opportunity to mention the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon as part of that energy mix within Wales and across the United Kingdom. While I am delighted to see the Welsh Government, local government and other authorities supporting projects such as the tidal lagoon, it is for the UK Government to come forward with a long-term proposal that gives us energy security. In my opinion, which again will come as no surprise to the Minister, that should include the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon.

Juggling the trilemma of meeting our climate change targets, improving our energy security and keeping tariffs down for consumers is a difficult task. I accept that, but I would like to stress that we need effective and radical action from the UK Government to address baseline power alongside our work to advance local renewable sources of energy. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland that the Minister is not a paper-pusher; she is a proactive Minister. I would like to believe sincerely that she will do all she can to deliver energy security for the UK using mixed sources, including geothermal energy and the tidal lagoon. I still have faith that the Government will deliver that.

Geothermal energy is a unique opportunity to build industry in communities where it is often missed most, by many people who still remember with great pride serving in collieries and who still face the cycle of unemployment two or three generations after the closure of those heavy industries. Of course, we should take caution and understand that that alone is not the solution to all of our energy woes—but it is a hugely positive opportunity for our coalfield communities, and for building a future energy mix based on renewable energy. It is one we must give serious consideration to.

I end with an invitation to the Minister. I appreciate that some energy policy is devolved to the Welsh Government, but if she would like to see the Caerau project, I would very much welcome her to my constituency to see in action the innovative work that Bridgend County Borough Council is doing, along with Cardiff University and the Welsh Government.

3.3 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I apologise for my late arrival to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this debate. I was lucky enough to secure an Adjournment debate on geothermal energy in my constituency in Clackmannanshire a few weeks ago on 4 June. The Minister was very generous in her response then and I hope she will be even more so today.
Geothermal is a fantastic opportunity and, as we have heard from different Members today, it could breathe new life into areas that have been without a key industry and key employment opportunities for a long time. It is important that as part of the industrial strategy, which looks at the entire United Kingdom, we use the powers in this place—energy is of course reserved—to make sure that every part of the United Kingdom benefits from geothermal initiatives and that the United Kingdom remains a leader in renewable energy and shows the way, as we have in other areas, such as wind. As I said in that earlier debate, there are a number of international partners and friendly countries that are already far ahead of us, such as El Salvador and Costa Rica, which already bring in 15% of their energy from geothermal sources. We are leading the way on wind and we want to lead the way on geothermal too.

Energy is a reserved function. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is now not in his place, mentioned the district heating fund—obviously heating is devolved in different parts of the United Kingdom, and that is £300 million. I hope the Minister and the Treasury could apply a little flexibility on how that fund is applied for, especially when it is linking to geothermal energy projects across the United Kingdom, so that all parts of the United Kingdom can benefit.

My Adjournment debate was very much about Clackmannanshire, an important part of my constituency. It has a long history of mining and milling. We have mines filled with water that is sitting at around 40°C. Geothermal energy enables us to use technology to tap some of that warm water to help with heating and to generate power. That could help not only build new homes, but slash energy bills. In my constituency, in Clackmannanshire, about one in three suffer from fuel poverty. Introducing a new form of energy could help tackle that, as well as slashing up to 50% off the energy bills of the local council. As we know, every council in the country faces funding challenges and that would be very welcome.

Geothermal is not a total solution, but it is an important part of our future energy mix. The leadership that the Government have shown through the industrial strategy highlights the fantastic opportunity we have. We have grasped that with both hands with wind, but we can lead in geothermal energy throughout the United Kingdom. I hope that through this debate and the Minister’s support we will be able to move that agenda forward and deliver for our constituents.

3.6 pm

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I thank the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for securing this debate. Many interesting points have already been made on geothermal energy; it has been quite an education. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland enlightened me that we have an MP in our midst who delivered projects on geothermal energy and I will make reference to that later on. Her points on disused coalmines are absolutely relevant, as were those raised by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) about the coalmines in Clackmannanshire.

My ears pricked up when the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned fracking. I would inform those here today that the Scottish Government have won their fracking case. The Court of Session has today rejected a petition by Ineos Upstream Limited and Reach Coal Seam Gas Limited that sought to challenge the Scottish Government’s action in relation to unconventional oil and gas. I am absolutely delighted by that.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McNally: No, I am not going to take any interventions.

Luke Graham: It was going to be complimentary.

John McNally: I can handle anything at all, but I want to get on with what we are talking about, which is extremely important. With the demise of coalfields, the potential for communities to benefit from new energy possibilities is endless. My home town of Denny in Falkirk is built on coalfields. The whole Falkirk area is built on coalfields and the potential that we have there should be realised. I hope that will happen over time.

As has been mentioned, geothermal energy is the heat stored in the Earth’s crust. The term brings to mind large geothermal energy plants exploiting volcanic sources of heat, such as those found in Iceland. As we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), geothermal energy satisfies around two thirds of Iceland’s needs. To add to that mix, there is also a vast non-volcanic geothermal heat resource—the top 10 to 15 metres of the Earth’s surface act as a heat sink, trapping the sun’s heat.

As we have heard, estimates of the UK’s geothermal power potential vary. There are credible estimates that we could supply 4% to 20% of the UK’s electricity demands, and all of its heat, which is indeed good news, especially if the energy were used to combat fuel poverty. Why people in this energy-rich country suffer from fuel poverty totally escapes me and probably everybody else here. Given the huge potential of this fully renewable resource, why is it not being widely deployed? Will the Minister tell me if any geothermal projects have been awarded to contracts for difference during either of the allocation rounds to date?

There are mature geothermal renewable technologies providing heat and electricity that should and must play their part in the decarbonisation of our energy networks. Then there are ground source heat pumps, where water is pumped through pipes laid within the top 10 to 15 metres of the earth. The pipes absorb heat from the soil, which is then extracted to provide heat. They are cheap to run and are typically small installations, servicing homes, individual buildings or small-scale industry. Ground and water source heat pumps accounted for 6% of non-domestic accredited installations and 15% of domestic accredited installations under the renewable heat initiative between 2011 and April 2018. We surely need to be more ambitious than that.

Deep geothermal plants draw heat from rocks or aquifers heated by the earth’s core, and the UK certainly has geological features suitable for that, especially in Cornwall, northern England, the English midlands and Scotland. As the hon. Member for Ochil and South
Perthshire said in a geothermal energy debate on 4 June, there are only nine geothermal energy projects in operation or being planned in the UK: four in Cornwall, two in the playing east of England, one in Southamption, one in Scotland and three in Scotland. That is hardly the uptake we would expect for a reliable form of renewable energy that poses few big engineering challenges.

The UK has a poor track record of supporting deep geothermal projects. The UK first showed interest in mapping the country’s geothermal potential during the 1970s oil crisis, but funding was withdrawn as oil prices fell. The practice of short-termism and lack of vision had begun. The first commercial deep geothermal project in the UK started life as a Department of Energy research and development project in 1980 in Southampton, as has been mentioned. The Department of Energy abandoned it as being not economically viable. With a lot more vision than the Department of Energy—perhaps thanks to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead)—Southampton City Council took over the project and developed it into a commercial district heating system, supplying more than 1,000 residential properties as well as hospitals and commercial and civic buildings. I applaud the council for taking that forward and for its courage and vision.

The UK deep geothermal energy challenge fund was set up in 2009 and £4 million was allocated to projects in 2009-10. However, the then Department for Energy and Climate Change halved that in 2010-11. What was it thinking about? An early-day motion was lodged by a cross-party group of MPs expressing regret about the decision and 46 MPs signed it. Will the Minister tell us whether I am right in thinking that no further funding has been provided by the fund? I look forward to her answer.

In 2013, the Government withdrew a £6 million grant allocated to the United Downs geothermal power station project in Cornwall on the basis that the project could not attract enough private investment. However, the project went ahead in 2017 after the company was able to crowdsource nearly £4.5 million in private investment using debentures sold by the renewable energy and crowdsourcing specialist Abundance Investment. There seem to be an unending series of obstacles facing projects because of the Government.

The UK’s regulatory landscape and renewable heat initiative create structural barriers to investment in geothermal energy. There is no joined-up approach to licensing geothermal energy in the UK. Developers must navigate the planning system plus a number of environmental permits and consents, and a lengthy, complex process involving local planning authorities, the Environment Agency, English Heritage and other bodies. Unlike a licensing system, a system of permits cannot secure investment in the geothermal sector. As far as I am aware, there is nothing to prevent another developer drilling next door to an existing development once a company has demonstrated a successful well. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Arrangements for geothermal energy under the RHI actually prevent investment. Asset-based lenders and finance companies do not regard future RHI revenues to be security against lending risk as they do in the case of physical assets. The physical assets of a geothermal energy project have poor portability, since so much of them are stuck in the ground. Asset-based lenders and

It is interesting that a third of the operations are in Scotland, where there is consistency of support. Following a feasibility study of the potential of geothermal energy to provide a renewable source of heat in Scotland, published in 2012-13, the Scottish Government set up their geothermal energy challenge fund. In 2015, the fund invested nearly £250,000 in five feasibility studies. The projects are an important step towards demonstrating how geothermal energy could cut the estimated £2.6 billion a year spent on heating by householders and the non-domestic sector. They are in the Aberdeen Exhibition Centre; Guardbridge in Fife; Polkemmet in West Lothian; Hartwood in North Lanarkshire; and Hill of Banchory in Aberdeenshire. A small investment returns very large benefits.

A further four proposed projects were invited to contact the Scottish Government’s low carbon infrastructure transition programme team to discuss possible early development support to help them in their proposals. Scotland’s first deep geothermal heating system, the HALO 2 km deep borehole being drilled near Kilminnock, received a £1.8 million grant and is under way as we speak. The Scottish Government’s investment in renewables is underpinned by a coherent decarbonisation strategy and is in turn underpinned by an all-party agreement. The political certainty, and the consistent political and financial support for that and for renewable energy as a whole, sends a message to businesses that the Scottish Government and Parliament are a friendly environment for investment in geothermal technologies.

Today Scotland may have a third of the UK’s planned or operational geothermal energy plants, but it seems that proportion will increase steeply in the near future. As with onshore wind and wave energy, the UK Government could learn much from the Scottish Government’s approach to supporting geothermal energy development. We are at a privileged moment in time developing renewable energy. The Scottish Government and Parliament are realising that ambition on behalf of all our communities.

Finally, I have been clear that any threat to Scotland’s distinctive and ambitious approach to environmental standards and climate change is completely unacceptable. The best way to ensure our environmental ambitions is to ensure that Scotland’s devolved powers continue to be respected.

3.17 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this important debate and on putting her case with such clarity and precision. After what she found out about geothermal during her research for this debate, I am sure she will agree with me that it is indeed Britain’s forgotten renewable. It is not forgotten because it is not feasible or because it does not bring tremendous benefits. It is forgotten
simply because no one has done much about it, even though that resource is under our feet in many parts of the country and is relatively easy to access. When that resource is accessed and developed, it provides potential free heat and power, probably for 100 to 150 years, as a result of a single borehole drilled down into the ground to unleash it.

Why it should be forgotten is a source of puzzlement to me, because it is a universal and beneficial renewable. Some people may regard deep geothermal as not quite renewable, in that if there is drilling into a deep geothermal aquifer, the aquifer, in theory, depletes over time. However, if water is being raised from the aquifer at the typical temperature level in the UK of about 73° or 74° Celsius, that resource will deplete at only 1° in heat per 100 years. Yes, it depletes a bit, but it is not exactly calamitous—unlike, one might say, drilling a fracking well, where the well depletes after about eight years.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Such a fact-free debate.

Dr Whitehead: No, it is a very factual debate—that is the difference.

The geothermal potential of the country is enormous, and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) set out what the potential would be, in electricity and heat, for the UK were we to proceed seriously with geothermal energy. Perhaps a limiting factor is the fact that geothermal energy is not available everywhere in the country. We need to be clear about the fact that deep geothermal is available on the basis of three different kinds of site. Basins with very ancient water at the bottom are one kind of site. Another kind, which require slightly different technology, are areas with radiothermal granite batholiths. I believe that the Minister, as a first-rate geographer in her time, will know all about batholiths and lopoliths and various other things. We have quite a lot of radiothermal batholiths in the UK, with naturally occurring radioactive-based heat coming from deep within the earth’s crust. Another kind of site relies on the availability of technology to release heat by putting water down one pipe and up another, giving geothermal as a result.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned, lower-temperature geothermal resources arise from abandoned mine workings. With heat-concentration techniques that is not a problem, in terms of concentrating the heat to get into production either for heat distribution or, indeed, for making steam to generate electricity.

As hon. Members have kindly mentioned, I have an interest in the debate because I think I can claim to be the only sitting Member of Parliament who has directly set up a geothermal energy scheme. I know a little, therefore, about how it all works. That scheme is based, as has been mentioned, in the middle of Southampton in a not particularly prepossessing shed, with a small wellhead in the carpark of the former Toys R Us store. That unprepossessing setting hides a well, drilled to about 1,800 metres. Water comes up at just over 70° Celsius and is converted into the material for a district heating scheme by a heat exchanger and concentrator. Now Southampton has a city centre district heating scheme with some 17 km of pipes, covering the university, the civic centre, the country’s only geothermally heated hypermarket and a five-star hotel. In other words, there is a complete city centre arrangement, heated substantially by geothermal energy. Not only that, but it has been heated in that way on a drilling basis since 1987, and will continue to be so until 2087 on present estimates of what may be available. That is the potential, in practice, for geothermal energy.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks with great knowledge, and I pay tribute to his work promoting geothermal power in his constituency. What are his thoughts on the potential for geothermal power in more rural areas, where there is great reliance on oil central heating, often at great cost and with a high carbon footprint? Does he believe that more could be done to incentivise and encourage developers in rural areas to look at geothermal power for new developments and homes?

Dr Whitehead: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that he is the only Member present for the debate who does not have a geothermal resource under his constituency. I have mentioned the different types of geothermal resource, and the large Mesozoic basins are in East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, around the whole Wessex area, in Southampton and Worcestershire, and in Cheshire. The radiothermal batholiths are in the eastern highlands, across the north-east and north-west of England, and in Cornwall. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will be delighted to know that about half of Northern Ireland is covered by two Mesozoic basins, giving most areas a strong resource.

The problem is, first, that that resource is not available everywhere and, secondly, that because of the capital cost of the borehole, geothermal energy is probably best suited to larger district schemes. One of the key issues is that because of the immediate availability of the resource, if an area—particularly a rural area—is capable of receiving it, it can be used for relatively small district heating schemes, or for local plant producing electricity in the area with a combination of a relatively small heat take-off. There is considerable potential, but I am sorry to tell the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) that at the moment that would be fruitless, as far as I am aware. However, it is possible to do it in some rural constituencies where the resource is more available.

Dr Poulter: A number of new, larger homes—particularly barn conversions, which are very popular in Suffolk—have invested in the technology as a means of heating. My question is more about how we can do more to incentivise developers on small-scale developments, perhaps on the edge of rural villages and towns, to look at similar schemes, and what suggestions the hon. Gentleman may have to bring forward those incentives.

Dr Whitehead: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to vertical hole shallow geothermal ground source heat installations. They are perfect for rural homes, as he described. They will provide sufficient heat, from a relatively shallow penetration into the earth, for heat exchangers to heat a home to a regular temperature of 60°-plus. Although I do not think that that is an essential part of this afternoon’s debate—it is more to do with ground source heat pumps—the hon. Gentleman is right. It is a technology that I would
strongly recommend for off-grid properties in which, in the past, the alternative heating might have been oil. It can absolutely reliably replace that form of heating. I join the hon. Gentleman in recommending to the Minister and the Government that efforts to secure the installation of ground source heat pumps for off-grid properties in rural areas would bear considerable fruit and ought to be strongly supported—rather more strongly supported, I suggest, under the renewable heat initiative than is currently the case.

I hope that I have set out the potential for geothermal energy, and stated how it can be done in practice and what its benefits are. I was leader of Southampton City Council at the time that the scheme I described was initiated, but provided that it had the resource, almost any local authority in the country could pilot and undertake such a scheme relatively easily. The main issue is how to raise the initial capital funding up front to get the scheme under way.

Let me say one or two words about what the Government ought to be doing—in addition to the constructive and sensible suggestions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland—to start using this resource. Capital grants will be required up front for the essential drilling of the well. The Government have underwritten several such schemes in various parts of the country to the tune of about £2 million a time, and we should extend the availability of those initial grants. Currently, the money available through the non-domestic renewable heat incentive is insufficient to get those schemes under way from a capital point of view. As far as deep geothermal is concerned, the RHI currently provides 5.38p per kWh. That does not compare favourably with funding for ground source heat pumps, which comes out at 9.36p.

At the moment, the incentives to get such a scheme going properly in any area are not sufficient. That is particularly unfortunate; geothermal energy ought to be considered a different form of renewable energy, because of its known longevity. When we invest in a geothermal energy plant, we are investing in a capacity that will give us free energy for 120 years—we cannot say that about pretty much any other renewable energy source, except possibly the Swansea tidal lagoon. I therefore think that the criteria under which geothermal energy is considered should be based on that kind of payback and that kind of timeframe.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend tempts me down a path that will be familiar to many colleagues. His point raises the question of whether it is appropriate to use the same Treasury discount rate for something that is so long-run as we would for a project that would last for 25 years. That would be another way of squaring the circle.

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point—that might be her seventh recommendation for the Minister this afternoon.

In conclusion, all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate have made clear their support for the potential of this form of renewable energy, and they have given examples from various parts of the UK. I particularly applaud the Scottish Government’s initiative to bring forward real funding for geothermal schemes, and I hope that in the not-too-distant future Southampton will no longer be the only geothermal plant in the entire United Kingdom that operates in the way I described.

There are glimpses of progress here and there, but it is by no means continuous or anywhere near to fulfilling the enormous potential that geothermal energy offers.

My request and suggestion to the Minister is that she might like to come to Southampton and have a look at the little wellhead in the Toys R Us carpark and the shed in which the scheme is housed, so that she can see for herself just how much comes from that little site, how much good it has done for a whole community and city, and how much good it will do for many years to come. We should consider geothermal energy in that way, and if we do, we will go a long way towards understanding how good it could be for the UK. I hope that we will then put our resources where our hopes are and ensure that geothermal energy has a bright future in the UK, just as it already does in other countries.

The hon. Member for Falkirk said that 66% of Iceland’s overall energy requirements come from geothermal energy. Indeed, a project called IceLink is currently considering the possibility of an interconnector between Iceland and the UK, in partnership with National Grid and Landsvirkjun, the state-owned generator in Iceland. That is a real possibility for the future. We could be in the position of having home-grown geothermal energy and bringing into the country someone else’s geothermal energy to complement that, so that together we would have a completely carbon-free source of energy that would last the UK for a century. I think that is a prize to be worked for.

3.38 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a great pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. We have had a brilliant and fascinating debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for an extremely thoughtful, excellent, fact-filled and numerical brief. It is always music to my ears to hear about net present values, particularly when they involve a £7 billion greater turnover for an industry, and the opportunity to create billions of pounds of gross value added and provide many jobs. I thank her for putting the debate in that context. I also thank, as she did, the Coal Authority and Durham University for providing an excellent backdrop to the debate.

As the hon. Lady pointed out, 25% of housing stock in her constituency sits on top of coal workings, which were dug out at exceptional, personal cost by men working in the most horrific conditions, with heat often being one of the worst things they had to deal with. It should therefore come as no surprise that the areas that have been allowed to flood are hot areas, and it would be great to think that at the Durham miners’ gala on 14 July, the topic might be how the legacy that was so painfully won by the shovels and picks of so many men could be used to create something positive for our low-carbon future.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) is always good at explaining these issues. I will not run through the batholiths argument again, but we have a long history of exploiting our various deep-geothermal sources. Like many other places, Bath, which is close to my constituency, was built on the thermal springs that were a happy by-product of those hot-spots. It was a pleasure to hear the hon. Gentleman describe the scheme
in the city of Southampton, which was the first of its kind in the UK. The important thing about that example is that it shows when it works. This sort of heating works well when there is year-round take-up. One of the issues with such schemes is that they do not work terribly well when people need heating at just one time of the year, because the economics are not attractive. The hon. Gentleman said that an entire ecosystem was constructed around that heat, so that is a really good example. Of course, the water is 76°C, so it comes up pretty hot. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland knows, the Eastgate renewable energy village, near her constituency, is the first eco-village in the UK. It was funded as way to explore this technology, and it provides heat from geothermal sources.

This is an incredibly exciting time to come together to talk about this issue. In 2013, we commissioned a review of the opportunities for geothermal, both heat and energy—I will talk about the distinction in a moment—and we mapped out the relevant parts of the UK. We have to pick through the issue of geothermal for energy and heat carefully. Iceland sits on the spot where the mid-Atlantic ridge breaks apart, which is not necessarily the most geologically stable place to be, so massive amounts of geothermal energy come to the surface, and islands are created overnight. I am very interested in the Icelandic interconnector project, which has the opportunity to create jobs in a cable factory where the interconnector makes landfall, and is a very interesting opportunity to bring in power generated by high levels of geothermal energy.

Unlike Iceland, we have relatively few opportunities to generate geothermal energy easily and cost effectively. The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) asked whether any projects have received a CFD, but none have bid in. Given what has happened to the cost of renewables—we have led the world in developing an offshore wind industry, and we are buying renewable energy at low prices that we could not have imagined even a few years ago—it is difficult for geothermal electricity to compete for CFDs. Arguably, the opportunities for heat are much more local and interesting.

Hon. Members have talked about the challenge of shallow geothermal, and we think that the most promising area is the low-temperature applications, such as district heating schemes. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, the water in her constituency is 30°C and shallow, so we do not need an incredibly difficult boring process to get it. We have heard from all parts of the UK, which is refreshing, about the opportunities for such heat schemes. I found the hon. Lady's point about creating economic value added, as the hon. Member expounded eloquently. That is the filter through which we review these schemes.

The hon. Member for Falkirk asked me several questions, which I shall try to answer. One was about the CFD—hopefully he is satisfied with my answer. Secondly, he said that the Government are not doing anything, but I am afraid I have to reject that. Heat is a devolved matter in Scotland, as he knows, but that has not prevented the UK Government from providing £4.5 million for the deep geothermal challenge scheme. The £250,000 he referred to was a welcome addition, but most of the funding was provided by UK-wide taxpayers. He talked about the HALO project, which I believe has been funded to the tune of £1.8 million by the Scottish Government and £3.5 million by the UK Government. I do not like to make political points; I find it much better to talk about investing in our UK-wide resources for the benefit of UK consumers and taxpayers. We have to go through the technological process and ensure these projects are economically effective so we do not burden taxpayers and bill payers unnecessarily, and we have to innovate.

Most houses—although not in rural areas—are on the gas grid, so when we invest we have to think hard about the cost trajectory vis-à-vis the fully costed position of being on gas heating. On the issue of rural homes, I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) here because, like him, I represent a very rural constituency, in which more than 40,000 homes, including mine, are not on grid. The challenge of decarbonising those homes and reducing our dependency on heating oil, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, is live. In our clean growth strategy, we set out our intention to ensure that no new buildings in rural areas use fossil fuel sources of heat by 2025. We are determined to get to that level and to encourage innovation of the kind that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich talked about.

How do we innovate, drive down the cost of extraction and use that heat to the maximum effect to ensure that these projects are economically viable? We are working with the Natural Environmental Research Council and the BGS, and are funding a £9 million geothermal research facility—the UK geoenergy observatory—to study low-temperature geothermal energy in former mines in Glasgow. We also have a number of other innovation programmes and are working with the industry.

I want to flag up a possible route to funding, because I want to ensure that some of these schemes are developed. Phase 7 of the industrial strategy challenge fund, with £10 million of funding, is open for bids. The launch event for it is on 4 July. It would be great to see whether we can create a bid for an innovative scheme to produce a working, cost-effective scheme. As the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said, we have the heat networks investment project, with more than £300 million of funding. I commend the Welsh Government, Bridgend County Borough Council and the hon. Gentleman's efforts in creating that scheme, which has bid into the heat networks scheme. Although this is a devolved matter in Wales, as always I think we are better when we work together. This is an opportunity to bring forward innovation and create a scheme that can be incorporated...
3.49 pm

We have the innovation route to market and the heat networks scheme. I have been given a number of “go away and look at them” actions, including looking at risk insurance and planning. As I said about the clean growth strategy, our building regulations must ensure that we do not put up new builds in off-grid areas that are dependent on current forms of fossil fuel heating.

We have an opportunity to make this very large latent resource, which was won so painfully over many years, part of our low-carbon future. We have spent tens of millions of pounds in this area. The UK is in a fortunate situation, because our renewables industry is powering ahead. Other countries look with envy at what we have delivered through other renewable sources of energy. We are one of two countries in the world doing enough to meet even a 2° rise in climate, due to what we have done in our energy industry. The opportunity to decarbonise heat, create local productivity and resource, and generate innovation that we can export elsewhere in the world is incredibly interesting.

Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland on securing this debate. I thank all other Members who spoke—we had a marvellous conversation about the opportunities in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). This is a very opportune time: there are routes to innovation, such as the heat networks investment, and I am in the lucky position of being able to make investment. I would like to see some of this innovation coming forward.

3.54 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for mortgage interest. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone.

When people develop disability during their working life, it can disrupt those lives in profound ways, often making it impossible for them to work. Disability will not always take a person’s life plans into account, and the Government have a responsibility to stabilise people’s lives in new circumstances. Recent changes to the Government support for mortgage interest scheme mean that the safety net to help such people to keep their homes is being eroded.

Taking out a mortgage over several decades is of course always a risk. Most people would never dream, on signing those papers, that a disability might one day affect their ability to pay the mortgage. Yet with about 170,000 claims for support for mortgage interest as of 2016, the issue is clearly widespread and affects a significant percentage of home-owning families in the UK.

Until 5 April 2018 the Government had offered support for mortgage interest as a benefit to homeowners in hardship. That covered only the interest payments on their mortgage. The amount borrowed, insurance policies and arrears were to be paid by the homeowner, but for disabled claimants that in practice would mean scraping the money together from their employment support allowance and personnel independence payments.

Since April, the Government have stopped mortgage interest support, instead offering a loan to be paid back with interest. It is repaid when the home is sold, ownership is transferred or the homeowner dies, making the sale of the house more costly and difficult for the claimant or members of the family. Many people are wary of taking out a loan due to that aspect of the policy, and the effect it might have on a future house sale.

Figures contained in the Office for Budget Responsibility’s “Economic and fiscal outlook” reveal that although all existing claimants have been contacted about the change, only about 10,000 have so far agreed to take up the loan. According to the document, that is “90 per cent short of the 100,000 expected by the end of 2018-19.” Many constituents have also approached me about the fact the loans will be delivered by Serco, a company exposed in the Paradise papers as having “a history of problems, failures, fatal errors and overcharging”.

Problems with the policy may cause many people to sell their unaffordable homes and move into the private rented sector. In doing so, many would be eligible for housing benefit, but that would in fact create additional expense for the taxpayer: the average support for mortgage interest claimant under the pre-April rules received about £1,800 per year, whereas the average housing benefit claimant receives about £5,000 per year.

The Government have labelled the change a cost-saving exercise, and claim that it is done in the name of fairness. The Minister stated in a letter that “the Government believes that it is right that, when they can, homeowners should repay this financial help they receive from taxpayers to accrue an asset, which may increase in value over time.”
However, it comes at the cost of forcing people to take on repayment of a new and unforeseen loan. At the same time, housing benefit can be paid to private landlords, who are able to pay their mortgages from taxpayer money given to tenants in receipt of housing benefit, without any of the associated requirements to repay. Even the Government and the Minister may agree that that is slightly hypocritical—it is not in keeping with the new term, the loan. The change in policy is causing extreme stress to already vulnerable individuals, in addition to forcing them to pay interest out of benefits that are designed to cover basic costs of living.

That was the case for my constituent, Alistair Dickson from Stoneybrets, who was in receipt of the support for mortgage interest benefit. Mr Dickson was registered as blind at work and, as a result, had to leave his job. He receives employment support allowance and disability living allowance, and has been paying his mortgage and home insurance from those payments. As a result, his household budgets are extremely tight, and it is very important to him to be able to stay in his own home.

This is where he has adapted to his new circumstances as a blind person, and where he feels safe. My constituent is unable to leave the house as often as he used to to as a result of his disability, so that is where he feels most comfortable. He is aware that, financially, it would be easier for him to move into rented accommodation, but that would not offer the same security, comfort or familiarity as his own home. That is therefore not an option for him. I do not believe he is alone.

Tens of thousands of disabled people, people with long-term illnesses, and pensioners who had previously claimed support for mortgage interest but who have declined to take up a loan, are in the same position. They do not know where they will scrape together the money for their mortgages. They do not know if they should pack up their homes, downsize or go into rented accommodation. They do not know whether their only option is to take out a questionable Government loan. All they do know is that that terrible policy decision has been made, putting into jeopardy their ability to maintain their own home. On their behalf, therefore, I ask the Government to pause and reconsider this ill-designed policy change to ensure that they do not penalise homeowners.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend gives an excellent constituent example. Does she agree that many constituents across the UK found themselves getting a surprise letter from Serco, which caused fear and alarm across the board in people affected by this policy?

**Angela Crawley:** The Government’s decision to have Serco institute this policy seems rather absurd given its recent bad press. Again, I must ask the Government to pause and reconsider this ill-designed policy change, and make sure that we do not penalise homeowners for changes to their circumstances that are beyond their control. Will the Government consider that?

4 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has raised the question of support for mortgage interest and I congratulate her on securing the debate. However, she seems to have developed a number of misapprehensions about the scheme, how it operates, and, in particular, how the system works.

It is worth restating the principles behind the change in the policy. Back in 1948 when the policy was introduced, the housing market was a different place and mortgage products were a different thing. In those days, it was unheard of for people to take mortgages into retirement, there was no such thing as an interest-only mortgage and the average house price was about £1,700. In the intervening decades, the housing market has changed significantly, yet this part of the benefits system remained unreformed and unchanged to reflect the reality we now face.

Back in 2015, when the reform was announced in the Budget, it was deemed to be appropriate and fair to reform the system to reflect the fact that there had been significant changes in the housing market and, as the hon. Lady outlined, to transfer this payment from a welfare payment in the benefits system to a loan. It was also decided that from a cosmetic point of view, as far as possible, there should be no change in how people see the scheme operate. It was recognised that the original scheme was designed to maintain people in their own homes and, exactly as the hon. Lady says, to ensure that they did not go into the private rental sector or lose their homes because of temporary unemployment. Back in 1948, this was meant to be something temporary for a few months or perhaps a couple of years, not the 20 years for which some people have been on it.

It was decided—we have carried this out in the execution of the scheme—that there should be as little disruption as possible to the recipients of these payments in the reformed new system. On a day-to-day basis, recipients of support for mortgage interest should see no difference between the old and new scheme.

The only difference is that when the property is sold or transferred at the end, perhaps even after the owners of the house have died, the amount of accumulated loan is recovered from that property. That is the only difference. On a day-to-day basis, the payments will still be made at exactly the same rate, with the same frequency, in the same way and with the same purpose of maintaining people in their own homes.

Let me cover some of the issues that the hon. Lady raises. On numbers, there is a significant acceleration in the number of people deciding either way. The bulk of people have now made a decision in principle. Large numbers of people are now in payment of the new support for their houses and quite a lot of people are in the process of getting through the system. The numbers are looking better and better. We expect to be on timetable for the transition to be complete later this year. We will publish statistics on SMI on a regular basis to keep the House updated.

Secondly, the hon. Lady raised Serco’s involvement. Let us be clear: Serco is not administering the loan. It was contracted only to provide information to individuals.
in which to decide, execute the documents and send they would like to have a loan. They then have six weeks offer—the point at which someone says in principle that Do not forget that the six weeks are from the loan are there to do, and they do it very well on a daily basis. That is exactly what those organisations is irresponsible. That is exactly what those organisations by DWP operations. execution and administration of the loan is done entirely communication phase, which Serco handles, and the correspondence, the follow-up phone calls to give people information about it, and the booklet to inform people how it works.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister not accept that the issue is with the timescales and the lack of notice? Have the Government learned no lessons from the changes to the state pension age? What assessment has been made of the number of women affected by those changes who are also affected by this change?

Kit Malthouse: I do not accept that there has been a lack of communication. If anything, we have over-communicated about the scheme. We went out of our way as a Department to ensure that literally hundreds of thousands of letters were sent and hundreds of thousands of telephone calls were made. We are still trying to contact some people, given the lack of clarity about the data we need to make those contacts. We are taking this in a very steady and sensible way.

Everyone is given plenty of time to make a decision—everyone is given up to six weeks from the loan offer to decide whether they want the loan. Once the loan documents are issued and sent off and a loan offer is made, people get six weeks to make a decision. We signpost people to the Money Advice Service or Citizens Advice if they need any kind of financial advice, because neither Serco nor the Department for Work and Pensions can offer such advice. As I said, there is a communication phase, which Serco handles, and the execution and administration of the loan is done entirely by DWP operations.

Angela Crawley: Does the Minister accept, though, that six weeks is in real terms quite a short time in which to get the relevant and necessary financial advice? Relying on services such as Citizens Advice—voluntary, third sector services that are often financially strapped—to give people the necessary financial advice about their future seems a bit irresponsible on the Government’s part.

Kit Malthouse: I do not accept that sending people to Citizens Advice or the Money Advice Service for advice is irresponsible. That is exactly what those organisations are there to do, and they do it very well on a daily basis. Do not forget that the six weeks are from the loan offer—the point at which someone says in principle that they would like to have a loan. They then have six weeks in which to decide, execute the documents and send them back. There is a whole period before that in which people gather information and discuss the matter with their financial advisers and, indeed, with Serco if they need more information on which to make a decision. Do not forget that the communication process started in July last year, so it has been ongoing for quite a while, and tens of thousands of people have successfully made a decision either way.

Chris Stephens: The Minister seems to indicate that affected individuals receive correspondence from his Department before the Serco letter. That is not what my constituents tell me, so will he place that correspondence in the Library for us to review?

Kit Malthouse: No, people do not receive correspondence prior to the Serco letter. An initial letter and an information booklet are sent out by Serco to warm them up to the change that is coming, and there is then a variety of follow-up information. Once someone has had all the information and thinks they are in a position to make a decision, they are in effect handed over to the operations people in the Department, who proceed to execute the loan—or otherwise—and load them on to the system for payment. As I said, tens of thousands of people have successfully made the transition, and many people are now receiving payment of the new support for mortgage interest.

I want to move on to a couple of other issues. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East mentioned vulnerable recipients. We have taken particular care over those who are vulnerable and those who might not have the mental capacity to make financial decisions on their own. In those cases, the timeframe for execution, resolution and transition has been significantly extended. We are working with people either who we know are vulnerable or who were identified during the process as vulnerable to ensure that they have an appointed financial adviser, deputy or whatever it might be to make those financial decisions for them. That process is much longer; we are able to extend it to be pretty much as long as they need to make the position clear.

The hon. Lady raised a particular constituency case. I urge her to reassure her constituents that the new scheme is designed to maintain them in their home. On a day-to-day basis they will see absolutely no change whatsoever. They can stay in that home for as long as they like—for the rest of their natural life. The only change for them is if they sell that house or it is inherited by someone following their death and there is any equity in the house, the accumulated loan will be recovered from the proceeds. If there is no equity, we write the loan off. Do not forget that it is a very low-cost loan: the interest we charge is the same as that charged to the Government on their debt. It is in statute that it is a low-rate loan. We recognise that this is a disruption and change for people, but as we take the scheme forward we will try to make it as painless as possible.

We expect that a number of people will decide not to take the loan but to try to go it on their own, making their own mortgage payments. We are hearing anecdotally that people are either managing to make the rest of their mortgage payments or, if they are in serious trouble, they are in arrears on their mortgage.
because they have not been able to make payments, it is open to them to come back to us and reapply for SMI. If they are in trouble, we will be perfectly willing to backdate that to the date of change for them, to 6 or 7 April, to clear their arrears and ensure that we do not put anyone in a difficult position.

I stress that this change is about increasing sustainability and fairness, balancing the interests of the taxpayer against those of someone who is in extremis and needs assistance but nevertheless is in ownership of what could be a very valuable capital asset. In other parts of the benefit system, we do not necessarily allow people to accumulate capital assets. If someone applies for housing benefit, we look at their assets and if they have between £6,000 and £16,000 in cash in the bank, whatever it is that affects it. SMI is specifically about protecting people’s homes and ensuring that they are maintained in those homes for the long term.

Angela Crawley: Does the Minister accept that through housing benefit most people forced into the private rented sector are paying someone else’s mortgage? Is it not a tad hypocritical to say that someone in hardship or who will not otherwise be able to work again should not have their mortgage paid when those in the private sector, often renting from private landlords, are paying mortgages through housing benefit?

Kit Malthouse: I do not accept the equation the hon. Lady is creating between the two. Those on housing benefit are being supported by us with a legally enforceable rental liability. It might be to a private landlord, a housing association or a council—who knows? They have a rental liability and we want to maintain them in their home, so we will support them in that through housing benefit.

Through SMI, if someone gets into extremis, we want to maintain them in their home and support them in their mortgage, subject to capital limits. All we are saying is that if someone stays on SMI for some time and therefore profit accumulates in their home, once they sell it some or all of that very low-interest, low-cost loan should be recovered so we can recycle that into support for other people in search of housing, in need of support and housing benefit or, indeed, in need of SMI. That seems only fair and reasonable.

We reckon that the overall saving for the taxpayer will be £150 million, plus or minus—we will see where we get to. Overall, in fairness, given how the housing market has changed and that SMI was only ever meant to be a temporary support—only for us to find people who have been on it for decades, and about half the people on SMI are pensioners, so there is likely to be significant equity locked into the property being supported—it seems reasonable that, when that house is sold, the taxpayer should recover some or all of the money advanced to maintain that person in their home.

Critical for us is that the scheme achieves exactly the same objective as the old benefit payments. People who need support for their mortgage can rely on the state to support them while they get back on their feet, or whatever it might be, and maintain them in their home. The hon. Lady’s constituent can be reassured that SMI should not change their status at all. If they take the loan, we will do our best to support them to stay in their home for the foreseeable future.

Question put and agreed to.
A120 Dualling

4.26 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposal to dual the A120.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. A line in my maiden speech to this House in 2015 was a request of the Government. I said that I would fight for the Government to “help relieve congestion on the A120, a road so regularly and heavily congested that many drivers cut through Braintree in order to bypass the bypass.”—[Official Report, 10 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 1287.]

It got a chuckle at the time, if not today. The point was that much of the town of Braintree, after which my constituency is named, is regularly blighted by heavy congestion and long tailbacks. My commuters and residents experience frustration because the A120 is regularly backed up to both the east and west of Galley’s Corner, a major interchange. To the west, people trying to get to the major retail site at Freeport are often stuck in traffic, as are people coming home from work. To the east of that junction, a number of small villages that straddle the A120 are brought to a standstill because of the tailbacks.

For those who are unaware of the geography of the A120, the section we are speaking about starts just to the south of Braintree and stretches across to the junction with the A12. It is part of a major east-west arterial route in a significant part of the country in both cultural and economic potential terms. Stansted airport is on it, and at the other end is the seaport of Harwich. There is a natural flow from an airport to a seaport, yet in the middle—the section we are speaking about—it reduces to an unsegregated minor road with one lane in each direction.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend, who has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, on bringing the debate forward. Does he agree that the A120 is a road of national significance because our region is a net contributor to the Exchequer and that, if it wants that to remain the case, we need the infrastructure in East Anglia and the south-east that supports Essex, Suffolk and the whole region?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He is right, and he invites me to come on to what I think is a credible pitch for why this road needs improvement. I am certain that my parliamentary colleagues who have constituencies along the route will enhance and reinforce some of the points that I will briskly make, to give time for others to speak.

I have already mentioned having a major airport and a major seaport at either end of this section of road, but ambitious plans have been discussed by local government at both district and county level to unlock the economic potential of this part of Essex and, in doing so, reinforce the economic potential of one of the few net contributory regions to the UK economy. The east of England is one of the net contributors to the UK economy. We want to contribute more, and we would be able to if we could unlock the entrepreneurialism and business acumen of the people who live and work in our part of the country. Both at district and at county level, there are ambitious plans for business investment and housing investment. Housing is interwoven with the necessity for good quality infrastructure—transport infrastructure, as well as digital and water infrastructure, and social infrastructure such as schools and doctors’ surgeries. It is absolutely key. The road is currently well out of date; it is at best a 1950s or 1960s road, dealing with a 21st-century level of traffic. Improving and dualling this road, rerouting it and taking away the pinch point at Galley’s Corner will not just benefit my constituents in Braintree—although as their representative here that is what I am passionate about—but it will benefit the county as a whole and the country as a whole.

The reason I talk about residents, local government and businesses is that we speak with one voice on this issue. It has been incredibly important to us that local residents, local small businesses, local businesses, Members of Parliament, district council and county council are all on the same page. We are keen not to miss the chance to get funding from Government in the next few years to relieve the pressure on a congested and often dangerous road.

I conclude by saying to the Minister that at this time we need to ensure that the whole of the UK economy is optimised. We have a fantastic opportunity ahead of us. We are now talking about international trade really, for the first time in a generation. For a road in the home counties, with an airport and a seaport, to still be so under-resourced is no longer acceptable. I ask Government to look seriously and sympathetically at the route that Essex County Council has put forward as its favoured option, because if the Government are able to support it, we can help the Government to pay the bills.

4.33 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my colleagues for securing this important debate. It is a debate that gives me déjà vu, as I have previously held and spoken in a number of debates on this very road and on strategic infrastructure in Essex over the last eight years, in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. Once again, the walls of Westminster Hall are about to hear the economic case for the A120.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) has already outlined, the A120 is an economic corridor stretching from the international port of Harwich in the east, which has trade links across northern Europe and serves around 700,000 passengers a year, to Stansted airport in the west, an important international airport that is growing and expanding, and is a huge employer both in Essex and now also in parts of Hertfordshire.

The A120 is important to our economy; in my view and, I think, all our views, it is even more important to the United Kingdom because of the connectivity for the east of England. Research from the brilliant Essex chamber of commerce, a great champion of strategic infrastructure improvements across Essex that has campaigned and worked with the business community, has shown that 56% of Essex businesses that responded to its survey regularly use the A120. Only the A12 at 82% and the M25 at 72% were used more than the A120. However, the Government know, and have heard not just from me but from successive Members of
Parliament from the east of England over the last decade and more, that the A120 is not fit for purpose. It needs investment to unlock future economic growth and jobs.

The A120 is also a dangerous road. I remember standing here in this Chamber in 2010, denouncing the A120 for being the 10th most dangerous road in the country. The number of fatalities and road accidents that take place on the A120 is simply appalling. In particular, the 12-mile stretch of carriageway between Braintree and Marks Tey has the greatest number of problems. This stretch of the road, which runs mostly through the Witham constituency, is one of the 10 most dangerous in the country. The accidents and fatalities are appalling. Figures produced in 2005 showed up to 25,000 vehicles using that stretch of the road every day, when single-carriage roads should usually carry up to around 20,000. Data published by the Department for Transport in 2010 on annual daily traffic flow suggested that 14% of vehicle movements on the A120 are accounted for by heavy goods vehicles, compared with an average of 6% across Essex. Too many people are getting hurt and injured on this road.

Likewise, too many businesses are haemorrhaging money while they are stuck in delayed traffic. The Minister will know—I do not think anyone in Government needs to be reminded—that Essex is an economic engine and the county of entrepreneurs. Since 2010 the number of entrepreneurs in the county has risen by 25%, from 52,000 to 64,000, and, as the county contributes £40 billion in gross value added to the economy, the economic case for investment in the A120 more than stacks up.

Back in 2008, proposals were put forward to dual the A120 so that we could meet new demands and sort out its dangerous nature; but as the last Labour Government trashed the economy they also spent a lot of time ignoring Essex, and the scheme was scrapped. Since then, colleagues and I have been campaigning with the Essex chambers of commerce, local businesses and the county council to get this back in the Government’s in-tray, so I was delighted when the Government and Essex County Council agreed a joint funding package to examine once again the feasibility of upgrading and dualling the A120.

Earlier this month, after route option selection, consultation and considerable analysis and assessment, Essex County Council announced its favoured route, known as route D. This route provides the best benefit to cost rate, at 3.75, of the options considered, and is less disruptive to the environment and existing settlements than other routes. It will also help to take traffic out of villages in my constituency, including Silver End and Bradwell, and could save travel time between Colchester and Braintree in the rush hour. Importantly, it will also be a safer route.

The proposal will bring the A120 from the location known as Galley’s Corner—we call it something else that I will not repeat here—through to a new junction with the A12 south of Kelvedon. I appreciate that the favoured route may still have its critics and that, as the proposals progress further, many other issues will need to be addressed, but our county has waited too long for road investment, for this road to be invested in, and for this strategic improvement to take place. We want to see clear action and leadership when it comes to investment in the A120. That means including the A120 in the second road investment strategy process, RIS2.

To make further progress, more work by Government and further work by Highways England is required. It will come as no surprise to our colleague the Minister that I will continue to press this case, as will all colleagues. While I appreciate that the Minister cannot prejudice the RIS2 process and the selection and prioritisation of routes for investment, the Department will have files, which I have no doubt are substantial, on the economic benefits of investment in the A120 and of the gross value added and the return from investing in Essex.

In discussions with the Treasury over the funding envelope of RIS2, it is fair to say that the Department for Transport can be confident in the economic case, which is part of a strong business case. The current cost estimate is around £555 million, which is an enormous sum. However, we do not speak enough about aggregate returns on investments, and we are talking about a strategic location that supports exports, trade and investment. Upgrading the A120 at the earliest opportunity will bring greater resilience to the economy, to the region and to our country.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when making the business case, it is important to look not only at Essex but at Suffolk? This road is vital to my constituency—connectivity is vital in attracting inward investment—and investing in it will very much help to attract investment to Suffolk, where significant plans are afoot for investment in the energy sector, both at Sizewell and in the offshore wind farms.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Delivering route D will provide £1.1 billion in GVA through new jobs, businesses and housing. It is important that, when looking at the work that we do on transport across our region—on rail, for example—we put forward a coherent business case to the Government for that very purpose. We are an attractive part of the country and we have different sectors that are expanding and growing.

To be up front about this, when we think about our trading options and the economic benefit to the eastern region post Brexit, investing in our roads will enormously benefit Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex. That brings me to asking the Minister to look into not only the A120 but the widening scheme for the A12, which is linked to the A120—these roads cannot be seen in isolation. A failure of successive Governments in the past has been to look at transport and roads as a singular and not a plural, in terms of having an integrated transport strategy.

The Government have already committed to widening parts of the A12 in a three-lane carriageway scheme. Most of the first section to be upgraded—the stretch between the junction 19 Boreham interchange at Chelmsford and junction 25 at Marks Tey—runs through the Witham constituency and is parallel to the great eastern main line. That widening scheme was subject to a consultation by Highways England last year and we are expecting an announcement of the route and the sections to be re-routed.

However, Colchester Borough Council has unfortunately put a spanner in the works at the last minute, as part of its local plan process. I am mindful that I, other colleagues, Highways England and local councils put forward proposals
for the A12 widening scheme—announced back in 2014—that would not be compromised by any work taking place with the local plans. We had that assurance from Highways England and the Department. That widening scheme needs to be re-established alongside the configuration with the A120, and all the councils must be clear with Highways England and the Department. We need to ensure that we again have an integrated approach to the development of our road transport links across Essex and to the facilitation of transport investment across the eastern region.

Essex needs the A120 to be upgraded and the A12 to be dualled. I hope that the Minister can answer fully today. As I said, her Department will have plenty of detailed engagement, work, correspondence and all the files from over the last decade on this, so there is no excuse for the Department not to put forward a coherent approach. The point to make today is that, when it comes to the A120, this is a huge, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to use RIS2 to be much more strategic and to have an integrated roads strategy for the east of England and for Essex.

4.43 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The A120 has long been in my heart as something needing improvement since well before I became involved in local or national politics.

Driving from my constituency—where we have wonderful beaches; it is a great tourist venue—and going westbound, as my hon. Friend, the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) said, it becomes completely blocked up at the section between Marks Tey and what we call cholesterol corner. I am sorry that I have to iterate that. Going from my constituency along the A120 has been a regular commute of mine. It sort of pets out beyond Bishop’s Stortford, where it goes back to being a two-way road, and then it peters out altogether in the middle of the countryside. The section between Stansted and Harwich is an absolute nightmare and has been for years.

We are now celebrating the decision on a preferred route, in which the A120 will be dualled between Braintree and Marks Tey—or south of Kelvedon, I should say. That is not ideal for me, but it is light years ahead of what we have to put up with now. I commend the application for RIS2 funding for this and I hope the Minister will take it further. It also should not be forgotten, as my hon. Friend mentioned, that the A120 is trans-European network route. It is a curious thing—all the major cities are supposed to be linked, east to west, from Moscow to Dublin. This section of the A120 is part of that, and it is a two-way road. It is nonsense. This is a major step towards realising that ambition.

I take this opportunity to call for further work, further down the line, to complete the A120 in an area that does not go through my constituency but that affects it hugely. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) knows all about it. It was built in the ’70s and it is now crumbling and beginning to fall apart. It needs a renewal, so why not put the whole thing done, from Harwich all the way to Stansted, and finish the job?

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that part of the A120—from Horsley Cross to Parkeston—which is vital for the economy of north Essex and is crumbling, as he says. However, I believe the Government should be able to say something this afternoon about the Highways Agency activity that hit the road and the resources that will be committed to it in the short term, if not the long term.

Giles Watling: My hon. Friend is right. I am delighted to hear that the Government can say something about that section, because it is still holding us up. Cars can still bowl along it at about 55 mph most of the time, but it is still a single lane on either side. It takes forever.

I look forward to our delivering a new, world-beating infrastructure across Britain, east to west, which we need now more than ever. We have not had that over the years. The A14 was improved many years ago, and it is about time the A120 was brought into line, so let us get that infrastructure in place. While I am standing here, I might as well mention that we ought to improve the railways in our area, too.

4.47 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) and all hon. Members who have spoken.

It is timely that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) has arrived, along with me, to underline that this is about not just Essex, or Suffolk, but the whole of East Anglia. The A120 is a critical road for the eastern region’s economy. As I said when I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree, we are a net contributor to the economy, and if the Exchequer puts up a cheque for this road, it will get its money back and then some. That is critical to the case that we are all making.

I will just pick up on a few specific points. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) made the point about the A12, which I wholeheartedly agree with. It would be good to get an update on that. The two roads have to be seen as an integrated project, not least because once trebling has occurred from Chelmsford to Colchester, the next stretch is in south Suffolk, where I can safely say we have possibly the worst junctions to be found in the United Kingdom. Drivers join a very sharp bend at national speed limit, probably in first gear. All I can say is that drivers should check that they have life insurance before they do so. I actually took the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), to see that, and he was struck by the danger it presented. I think we often underestimate the safety issue for all these projects. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree made that key point—this is dangerous; it is not just about the economics.

However, the business case will be about the economics, and while there is obviously an understandable focus on housing, we have to emphasise the extent to which the road can drive serious industry, exporting and services—not least with the airport. I do not want young people in my constituency just to get on a train to London to try to find a good job; I want them to have opportunity at home, in the local region. At the moment, to go from Sudbury, the biggest town in my constituency, to Stansted...
is just beyond commuting distance. If we improve the road, we can get it within commuting distance and the thousands of vacancies can be filled with people from the local workforce. I therefore endorse what has been said so far. The economic case is strong, and I urge the Government to consider it wholeheartedly.

4.50 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) on securing this debate on a hugely important topic—a stretch of road that is hugely important to so many of our constituencies across the eastern region.

The A120 does not, in fact, touch my constituency at all, yet it is hugely important to it and to its future prosperity. In the past few years, tens of thousands of homes have been built in Colchester, but without adequate or appropriate transport infrastructure to support them. We have had the housing but we have not had the roads, locally or regionally, to support that massive growth. In fact, ours has been the fastest-growing town in the country for some time.

My hon. Friend made a valid point when he asked whether there could be another road in the country that links a growing international airport and an international port, which is also growing, by a road that is single track in some parts. It gets so congested that people can get stuck behind a slow-moving vehicle and it can delay their journey by a considerable amount of time, and yet the road is of major strategic importance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) made a valid point about the economic case. That is not in question. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk so eloquently made the point that the Government will see a return on this investment and then some. We know that because Essex and the eastern region are already powerhouses for the British economy.

James Cleverly: Does my hon. Friend agree that not only will there be an economic return on investment in this road, but, because of the particular nature of the local and regional economy, the return on investment in the road will be greater and quicker than those on similar investments in other road projects around the country?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I could not agree more. I have touched on the international airport and the port, but there is so much more. Colchester, which is sandwiched between those two important infrastructure projects, is hugely important in terms of business growth. The University of Essex, which is just across in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) but hugely important to both our constituencies, is growing and contributing to huge amounts of business growth; it is attracting businesses to the area.

We know that this is coming. There are plans, as part of the garden settlement movement—that is a debate for another day—for a business park larger than the biggest business park, in Cambridge. If we get it right and if we get the transport infrastructure piece right, this will be a prosperity corridor, stretching from Stansted airport to the port of Harwich, and we can benefit from that.

Priti Patel: Does my hon. Friend share my view that there is an opportunity through investment in the A120 but also our wider road network—and, in fact, our railway lines—when it comes to the wider transport and infrastructure approach, and that Departments should be working in a much more joined-up way? He has already touched on planning; this is a question of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury and the Department for Transport working on a holistic and coherent case.

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I could not agree more that we do not have a holistic approach at the moment and, as a result, people are not seeing the bigger picture and the prize that is on offer.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for letting me make this point. On joined-up thinking, does he agree that resolving the issues on the A12 is also part of the bigger-picture solution? Unlocking the issues on the A120 is key to unlocking the improvement on the A12, which we also need in order to ensure that Essex is better connected.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is almost as though she has read my mind, because in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham, I intended to make exactly the point that the A120 cannot be seen on its own, in isolation, as the panacea. It is not the whole answer, but it is part of an overall picture that includes the A12; that is why the extra lane is so important between Chelmsford and Colchester—and beyond, up into Suffolk. This is also about our rail line, and we need to get this right. We have a whole fleet of new trains starting to arrive next year on the Great Eastern main line. If we start to unlock the additional capacity that will come with the digital railway—if we start to see that investment from the Department for Transport via Network Rail in our rail line—all of a sudden we will become a real powerhouse, because through transport infrastructure we open up economic opportunities and business growth. In particular, Colchester, but also wider Essex and the eastern region, will be the place to invest and the place to relocate a business to. The size of the prize is so great—it is a huge opportunity—and the Government really should sit up and listen to us about it. If Departments work together on housing, transport infrastructure and beyond, and if they work with us, the opportunities are huge.

My final point is not just about the economic case, but about why this scheme is so important to the region. That is clear to see, because of the overwhelming and clear support from everybody—and I mean everybody. Borough, district and county councils, the local enterprise partnership, businesses and business groups—such as the chambers of commerce—are absolutely invested in it. They have been so invested in it that they have put in money, resource, time and effort. We all know from our postbags the number of people who contact their Member of Parliament about issues with the A120 and how keen they are to see those issues resolved.
Whether it is about the economic and business case, the social impact on our constituencies or just the fact that we need to connect a major international airport, a major international port and a very important town in the middle—Colchester—we have to ensure that the A120 scheme goes ahead. I encourage the Government to stump up the cash to make it happen.

4.56 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank all hon. Members for their considered contributions to this important debate, and not least the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) for initiating it. I think we can agree that the case made by all hon. Members was very compelling. The link between the port and airport serving Essex is at the heart of the economic strategy presented today. The economic opportunity that such an enterprise corridor could deliver, in terms of real growth in the region, has been cited by some to be worth as much as £1.3 billion, I have read, and all for a cost of £555 million in its creation. It is clear that domiciliary development is occurring, and that brings an opportunity to see industrial investment to provide jobs for those communities as well as the wider economy. Clearly, where such development takes place, there has to be well developed transport infrastructure, but that certainly is not currently the case, especially at some of the pinch points on the A120 route where there is significant congestion.

Giles Watling: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is not only industrial development—manufacturing and so on—that would benefit from this scheme and that there is a massive tourism offer? I am thinking of the wonderful beaches of the east coast. At Parkeston Quay, we have so many cruise ships that come in every year. It is a pity that the people who arrive there have to struggle with our dreadful infrastructure to get to other parts of the country such as London and across to the central Midlands.

Rachael Maskell: I agree that tourism is a really important consideration when we are looking at infrastructure investment. It should be at the heart of the wider discussions and seen as an economic piece all by itself.

The debate on how the A120 can be improved to alleviate much of the congestion has been a long time coming. Five options were originally presented. I appreciate that those have been whittled down to four, and option D has been favoured by Essex County Council as the preferred route for the new A120. I also note that option C, interestingly, would see approximately one third of the route bifurcating Bradwell quarry and therefore would relieve some of the environmental impact should that scheme go ahead. We must also note the importance of farmland and agribusiness. In the Government’s planning of development, whether rail or road, they should take on board the need to ensure fertile land is maintained for the purposes of growing our food. I know there is much debate on that point.

The second compelling case made by the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) was about road safety. With 53 fatalities and 325 serious injuries on this stretch, it is clear that not intervening would allow those risks to continue. That is a serious consideration.

It is worth saying, however, that we cannot look at road improvement without looking at intermodal and alternative modes of transport, and seeing the improvements that can be brought in from other schemes—particularly our rail, but also other forms of transport—in serving communities. While I understand that all hon. Members are trying to promote their local scheme for RIS2, I say to the Minister that we need to look at intermodal options before we look at road. It appears we have shifted to a road-first policy, as opposed to looking at public transport as the preferred option. Evidence from Newbury, Blackburn, Lincoln and other similar cases has shown how induced capacity is having a serious impact on their local economies, so we have to be careful as we make these decisions and look at them in an integrated-transport way.

James Cartlidge: Looking at alternative modes is a fair point, which I hear about all the time. The issue we have is lorries. In our modern economy, all our goods have to go through lorries, from Felixstowe or whatever port. It is coming down on HGVs. It is very hard to get that on to rail when it is at capacity, even though we have a good freight service. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is where there is a shortcoming in alternative forms of transport?

Rachael Maskell: I agree, there is a challenge with the use of freight. It creates an opportunity, however, to put the focus back on putting freight on to rail. We are already 45,000 lorry drivers short in our economy. How we expand rail freight, therefore, is a serious consideration, in order to see that fast through-put of freight. That is something to which we have given much thought and attention.

Where there have been road-widening schemes, after 20 years we have seen induced capacity building congestion again, with an increase as high as 45%. Out of 25 projects only five have delivered the economic benefits that were promised. We need to ensure that everything is thoroughly tested before investment is made.

Will Quince: I apologise for the slight delay in jumping to my feet, but I was a little surprised by what I think the hon. Lady might have said. Did she say that under a future Labour Government, the A120 development would not go ahead?

Rachael Maskell: I most definitely did not say that. The hon. Gentleman must have misheard me. I emphasised the focus we need to put on intermodal transport in particular, looking at issues such as increasing capacity on our rail networks, because we know other serious challenges are afoot across our freight industry. It is important we take those considerations on board.

Vicky Ford: I have campaigned for rail freight for many years. Is the hon. Lady aware that Chelmsford is the busiest two-platform train station in the country and there simply is not additional space to take additional freight down the great eastern main line in the timeframe involved? Digital networks may add a bit more, but we need to resolve the freight by mending this road and our road networks, not just by saying, “Let’s get it on the trains.”
Rachael Maskell: There are choices to be made. I am saying that we invest either in road or in rail. Looking at investment is part of what is called for by the freight industry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Rachael Maskell: If I may, I will finish my point. The Rail Freight Group, which I meet with regularly, has identified how those east-west connections need serious investment. If we want to develop Harwich as a port and see Felixstowe thrive as well, in order to take freight from the east into the west, it is important that we do not dismiss those opportunities and see that proper investment.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady is being gracious in giving way. It is not a binary choice between rail and road. We can and must have investment in both. She said that intermodal schemes should be a priority over road. We can and must have investment in both. She is giving way. It is not a binary choice between rail and road. We can and must have investment in both. She said that the Labour party would not prioritise the dualling of the A120?

Rachael Maskell: I have already answered the hon. Gentleman. I said that we would have an intermodal approach to all transport systems. It is crucial that we look at the opportunity that public transport can provide.

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: If I may move on a little, we will see what time there is left. It is important that our approach to strategically developing economic growth, transport planning and housing development brings all development and planning together. We have seen a piecemeal approach to planning, which has not looked at how to serve economic or residential communities and ensure that there are sufficient transport mechanisms to provide that support. We believe that truly sustainable economic and residential hubs need to work together with the integrated transport system in order to best serve communities. We know that in the developments that have taken place, 81% of people living in those areas drive to work, as opposed to having wider options and intermodal choices. That is what I am arguing today.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady said the Labour party would invest in either rail or road. This Government are committed to investing in both. Which is she planning to cut?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Lady is again taking my words and not using them in the way they were said. We will look at intermodal first and at the wider options of ensuring properly integrated transport. Any Government should do that, to ensure that we have the most sustainable and usable rail, bus, active travel and road system that there is. Intermodal integration will give us the best transportation system. Talk to anyone across the transport sector: they would agree with that approach, as do many Government Ministers, who say that they want to see an intermodal shift, too. I have heard such words many times from the Government. I am sure they would agree that is also important, if they are looking at proper economic and residential investment, such as is being suggested by the scheme presented today. That is the approach Labour would take.

We need to ensure that improvements made today do not call for further improvements and widening just a few years down the road, as has happened in many of these schemes. We need long-term solutions and investment put in place, to ensure there is not chaos in the future.

Giles Watling: The hon. Lady is being gracious in giving way. Is she suggesting that people would give up taking their cars to their holiday destination? That is an essential part, in many cases, of a holiday in the UK, so that people can explore the countryside.

Rachael Maskell: I am not suggesting that at all. I am talking about intermodal choice, which is important. Going forward, people need to have real options in how they travel, whether for work or leisure. We want to see those choices expanded. Many people at the moment, as I highlighted, have such limited choices that they have no option but to use the car. If we truly are to make the intermodal shift, we need to see more options being made available for commuters and people travelling for leisure.

James Cleverly: Unfortunately, the hon. Lady has missed quite a fundamental point and I will reinforce it, if not for her benefit then for the ears of the Minister. This proposal is not about taking existing transport patterns and just making them happen on an improved road. What this proposal is about is unlocking residential and employment opportunities within the region, so that people are not forced to drive or take the train to London, for example, to get good-quality work. So the idea behind this proposal is to develop sustainable communities and sustainable economic activities in and around the region itself, reducing the need for long and polluting journeys, and increasing the opportunities for people to work close to where they live, where their children go to school and where they have amenities around them.

Rachael Maskell: I fully understand the scheme; I have read it in much detail. That is why I am making the case that it is so important that we give people real choice.

In my closing remarks—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Lady give way very briefly?

Rachael Maskell: Very briefly, then.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. Will she just give an assurance that the Labour party supports the dualling of the A120 all the way from Colchester to Parkeston, which is a stretch of road that is long overdue for dualling?

Rachael Maskell: I think I have made myself perfectly clear in today’s debate, with all due respect. What I have said is that we believe that we should have a fully integrated, intermodal approach to transportation, which, as I have—

James Cartlidge: Yes or no?

Will Quince rose—
Rachael Maskell: I will not take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. [Interruption.] No, it is not a no. As I have said—

Vicky Ford: It is not a yes.

Rachael Maskell: As I have said in this debate, we need to look at that intermodal option and that has not been presented in the case that I have read. Clearly, we need to see investment across all our modes of transport, so that hon. Members’ constituents have real choice over how they travel and so they do not have to take the car if it is their preference to take a bus or train. That is what I am saying. We have got to see integrated—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: May I finish my sentence? So that we can see an integrated approach to how we assess transport projects in the future, rather than looking at the silos of rail over here, and road over there, which is the approach taken at the moment, as we know, because the RIS process is completely segregated from the control period, and we want to see a real integrated approach. That is the point that I have made throughout the debate.

James Cartlidge rose—

Will Quince: Will the hon. Lady give way again? She has been very kind.

Rachael Maskell: I see two hon. Members. If it is going to be a completely different point that will be made—[Interruption.] If it is not a completely different point, I will not give way. I will not keep repeating what I have said, so I will just bring my remarks to a close.

It is really important that we consider how we can build sustainability into the long-term future. That is why we want to put the resources and support behind a truly intermodal approach to transportation, but not just transportation in isolation. We want to integrate that across all planning, including economic and residential planning, so that all of our constituents have real choice as to how they travel to work and for leisure.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Hollobone, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship.

No doubt my colleagues have realised that I am not 6 feet 4 inches, so I am not the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who is the Minister with responsibility for roads. However, I will do my best to respond to all the questions put today and no doubt Department officials will write to answer any questions that are not responded to.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) on securing this debate about upgrading the A120 in Essex. He has made a strong case for the economic benefits of upgrading the A120. Other hon. Members, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), also spoke, about not only the economic benefits that would be opened up but the business case, the residential case and the case for tourism, which was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling).

We know that transport is a key driver of the economy and an improved network will provide better journeys and boost local growth, productivity and opportunities. I agree with all of the representations that have been made here today and no doubt the Department is listening very closely, especially to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham, who has been banging this drum for eight years—nearly a decade—and I do not doubt that there are reams of paper about the correspondence and meetings that she has had with the Department over those many long years.

James Cartlidge: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for her support. Was she shocked, as we all were, that today the Labour party was unable to commit to supporting explicitly the dualling of the A120? Does she agree that we can talk about choice, but in the real world, where our constituents live, they do not have a choice? We cannot move goods, other than a small proportion, down rail; they will continue to be moved on HGVs for a long time. People may not like that, but that is the real world in which we have to plan our roads today.

Ms Ghani: It has been a very passionate debate and I was also slightly startled that the Labour party representative today, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), could not bring herself to recognise that Essex is a gem of a county in economic development and somehow was taking away choice, by removing the opportunity to invest in road infrastructure, let alone in tourism, business, residential or economic development in the future. However, these debates sometimes bring out surprising results.

Will Quince: Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister could outline, in response to some of the comments made by the shadow Transport Minister, the urgency of this situation, because if this road is not in the next road investment scheme or RIS2, and goes back to the drawing board, how long would that set us back? More than that, does she think that that would be a slap in the face for all of those people who have worked so hard together, over years, to put this road scheme forward, and to promote it and push it? It would be a slap in the face for all those people to say, “Back to the drawing board—not good enough”.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend mentioned the phrase “slap in the face” a number of times: I am not sure how I can respond to that. However, the Labour party is not even putting this scheme on the drawing board; it will not even consider it. No doubt, that will be absolutely frightening for hon. Members’ constituents to hear.

I do not want to prejudice the outcome of the road investment strategy 2 process, but I hope that what I will go on to say later in the speech will provide some succour to the Members who are here today and their constituents. However, I was surprised just as much as my hon. Friend was that the Labour party will not even consider this scheme in the future.
In December 2014, the Government launched the first road investment strategy—RIS1—which outlines how £15.2 billion will be invested in our strategic roads between 2015 and 2021. This is the biggest upgrade to our strategic roads in a generation. It includes the widening of the A12. Many Members said we need to approach this work holistically: my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham; and my hon. Friends the Members for South Suffolk, for Braintree, for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). They understood that both these schemes—for the A120 and the A12—need to be linked, so I will just touch on the A12 first.

The proposed work will include the widening of the A12 between junction 19 at Chelmsford and junction 25 at Marks Tey, where the A12 currently joins the A120. We have also provided funding for smaller scale safety improvements. On the A120 east of the A12, at the Hare Green junction with the A133 to Clacton, Highways England has commenced construction of a new £3 million roundabout to improve road safety. Work there is expected to be concluded by the end of this year.

The Government continue to invest in improvements to rail infrastructure in Essex and Department officials continue to work closely with local partners to identify local transport improvements. The South East local enterprise partnership, which includes Essex, has secured £590 million from the three rounds of the local growth fund, supporting projects, including transport schemes, that facilitate economic growth and housing. It has enabled key schemes in the county to be taken forward, such as an investment of £16 million towards improvements on the A127, and an investment of over £70 million towards the widening of the A13 in Thurrock. Both those routes are seen as key routes in Essex.

We recognise the importance of the A120 as a key part of the wider transport network, including all the other benefits that it brings, such as tourism, housing and business. The A120 is a key east-west route connecting areas across the region from the port of Harwich to Stansted airport. It links the east of England to the Midlands and the north, so is of national as well as regional importance.

The single carriageway section between Braintree and Colchester is currently a bottleneck on the route. Heavy traffic is a burden on the towns and villages that it passes through. That is why we have provided £4 million to Essex County Council as a contribution to the development work for the proposed improvement scheme. I am very grateful to the council for the excellent work it has done to develop these proposals and take them through a non-statutory public consultation on a range of options.

The proposed scheme would provide the plans for new housing and growth in the area, in particular the proposed development at Marks Tey. This will boost the economy in Essex and beyond. It will complement the widening of the A12 between Chelmsford and Marks Tey, which we are currently developing as part of RIS1.

Priti Patel: I thank the Minister for being very generous both in her remarks and in giving way. She touched on the A12 widening scheme, and I want to re-emphasise my earlier point on that. That road's development has been put on hold because of the development of the local plan in Colchester. We were told that categorically about five weeks ago, having previously been told that all planning factors had been considered. I know that the Minister responding to the debate is not the Minister for roads, but perhaps her officials will take away that I would like a meeting with that Minister and with Highways England to find out what on earth is going on. It seems crazy to advance the A120 without the A12. We need to integrate much more this whole way of working, and I again make my plea that all three Departments I named earlier come together on the issue.

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner for her constituency, particularly on this issue, and I do not doubt that her request for a meeting will be respected and taken forward. I understand that there was a delay and that the notification of it was made most recently.

The favoured option for the A120 scheme that the council announced on 8 June is supported by a strong analytical assessment and has gained support from both the public and the business community, providing a good case for its consideration as a candidate for inclusion in the second road investment strategy. I cannot comment enough on the strong representations made not only by those Members of Parliament here today but by others who have met repeatedly with the Department for Transport: my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). Strong cases have been made, not only within this debate but behind the scenes, in lobbying the Department for Transport.

We are currently developing an affordable, deliverable investment plan for the strategic road network—the SRN—for the period 2020-25. The work draws on two years of research and public engagement. For example, Highways England has refreshed its 18 route strategies, which cover the whole of its network and present a high-level view of both performance and constraints on the existing road network. The route strategy for the east of England identified a number of capacity and safety issues on the A120, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham mentioned.

In December 2017, Highways England published its initial SRN report, which set out its proposed priorities for RIS2 and looked at the strategic road network as a whole rather than suggesting specific enhancements. The Department consulted on the document over the winter and we are using the responses to shape our thinking as we develop the next road investment strategy. Essex County Council's work in developing the A120 scheme is also feeding into the process.

Our consultation on RIS2 has confirmed the considerable competition for the funding available for new schemes. A great deal of evidence arguing for a range of investments was received, including responses in favour of the A120 upgrade, among other things. There was also support for the schemes that were included in RIS1 for development for RIS2—the A12 Colchester bypass widening and the A12/M25 to Chelmsford improvement. All those proposals are being considered for inclusion in RIS2, alongside others from across the country. I cannot prejudice the process and the outcome, but the Government will announce their final decisions on RIS2 in 2019. Strong
representations regarding the business case, as well as the cases in support of homes, the social environment and tourism, have been made today.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree and other Members are reassured that the Government understand the importance of the A120 scheme, both in the region and nationally, and that we see the need for investment in transport infrastructure to provide much needed economic growth. We will take that into account as we finalise our plans for the next road investment strategy.

5.23 pm

James Cleverly: I thank the Minister for her comments. What I take away is that although she was careful not to prejudice her Department’s decision, and we completely understand that she is duty bound to go no further than she has, I think I speak for all Members representing the A120 route and the region when I say that we are pleased to hear that, on behalf of the Department, she recognises the strategic importance of the road, the economic opportunity that improvements would unlock and, perhaps on a personal note, the passion of all of us in the room. Although it is always iniquitous to single out individuals, I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) have been fighting this fight for a very long time. If for nothing more than their sanity, I urge the Minister to take back the message to the Department that the passion overflows among regional MPs.

It is disappointing beyond belief that where we have geographical unanimity we seem not to have been able to get as reassuring a set of noises from the shadow Minister. To say that her response was lukewarm would be an exaggeration beyond my capabilities. Therefore, we rely on the good offices of the Minister and the Department to turn what I believe is a genuinely held recognition of the road’s problems—the congestion, the danger and the negative impact on the ability of businesses to maximise their potential in what is already a great part of the country to do business but which could be so much better—into a relatively modest investment in the A120.

I thank the Minister for listening intently and for what I know she will do next, which is to take the passion of the Members present back to the Department and reinforce the case that has been made by us, by local government at both district and county level, by local businesses and by groups such as the A120 campaign, to which we all subscribe and give our energies. If ultimately we are successful in securing the funding to improve the road, I give the Minister our collective guarantee that we will personally hand over the large bags of cash that will inevitably flow from the investment into Treasury coffers, to be deployed in the great work that public expenditure does around the country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): There have been no hold-ups or congestion today, and we are finishing within the scheduled time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the proposal to dual the A120.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 June 2018

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN in the Chair]

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

9.30 am

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Good morning. I have some technical announcements to make before we start the debate. First, gentlemen may remove their jackets, because the air conditioning in the room is not functioning properly and the temperature may rise. I am sorry, ladies; I cannot really say the same to you! It could get quite warm in here.

We have a few technical failures, in actual fact, I think because there is no one who can put a fuse into the fuse board. We do not have the screen to my right operating, or the screen behind me. We rely entirely on that screen over to my left, although of course my Clerk has a screen here with him. If anyone wants to ask a question about timing or anything else, I shall certainly entertain that.

Without further ado, as the mover of the motion is present, I call Rosie Duffield.

9.31 am

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I beg to move, that this House has considered the Government’s response to the UN report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Thank you, Dame Cheryl. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in my first ever Westminster Hall debate.

This is an issue of great national importance and, indeed, embarrassment. What I am raising today is something in dire need of urgent and effective remedy. I am referring to the United Nations’ assessment of the UK Government’s ability—inability, I should say—to protect the rights of our disabled citizens.

As I am sure most people in the Chamber are aware, last August a UN report by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found that the UK was in serious breach of international human rights law. The report found that the UK was lacking in enforcing or upholding equality legislation in sectors including education, justice and employment.

The beginning of the report offered some praise for recent Scottish and Welsh legislation, but it went on to make 80 recommendations for further action by the UK Government and the devolved Parliaments to implement. As important as I believe it to be to do so, unfortunately, I shall not have enough time today to consider all 80 UN recommendations in my opening speech, although I hope that colleagues will afford focus to some areas that I shall sadly have to miss.

I shall focus on those aspects of disability and equality rights that are the most repeatedly brought to my attention by my disabled constituents and disability rights groups throughout the country. Those are: poverty, inequality in employment, and substandard, illogical and poorly enacted access to welfare provision. As such I shall concentrate on articles 27 and 28, and draw some attention to articles 7, 13 and 21.

Let me begin by painting a picture of the situation in the UK. Right now, about 4.2 million disabled people live in poverty across the country. In fact, more than half of those living in poverty are either disabled or living with someone who is. In the UK, half of all disabled people are still unemployed and, even when they do attain employment, not enough provision is in place for them to maintain it sustainably in the long term.

The report on article 27 of the convention made four key recommendations, which have yet to be implemented. The Government have not yet offered an effective employment policy for disabled people.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing her first debate in Westminster Hall, and what an important subject this is. On employment specifically, may I invite her to attend or even join my all-party group on youth employment, which looked at this very subject—those furthest from the labour market—and in particular to look at the report, which drew on organisations such as Leonard Cheshire Disability, highlighting a really important body of work in this area?

Rosie Duffield: I shall do, thank you; that will be interesting.

I suggest that access to legal aid and information on accessing it should be made much more readily available, so that disabled people can challenge employers and potential employers on inadequate access arrangements. According to observations of the report on article 13, regarding rights to justice, the UK must:

“Provide free or affordable legal aid for persons with disabilities in all areas of law”.

I ask the Government: what consideration of the legal aid system has been made to facilitate and enfranchise the legal challenges of disabled people on any of the convention articles or the recommendations in the UN report?

In order to access good legal representation and advice, disabled people also need quality digital information services that take account of customers’ disabilities in their design. On article 21 of the convention, the UN committee recommended that the UK improve statutory accessibility standards for all digital information services, including those offered by Her Majesty’s Government.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of that commitment is access to information? Since 2010, 478 libraries have closed and we have lost 8,000 librarians, so access to information is yet another blockage to disabled people going into work and gaining their human rights.

Rosie Duffield: Absolutely. I have heard from my own constituents about the assumption that they have access to a computer, and many people use public libraries for that service.

On top of all of that—as if existing barriers to disabled people maintaining sustainable income and accessing information and help were not already high enough—the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities rapporteur concluded that UK Government
cuts have disproportionately impacted on disabled people, amounting to “grave and systematic violations” of the rights of persons with disabilities.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Going back to the point that the hon. Lady made about helping disabled people get into work, my experience in my constituency is that a huge number of projects are going on that do help disabled people to get into work. Clearly, every individual is different, and some people need different levels of support, but will she join me in saying, “Well done,” to the 600,000 disabled people who have moved into work in the past four years? Great progress is being made, and we should congratulate them.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady resumes, may I remind people that we like to keep amendments within the 10-minute limit? The hon. Lady has had 10 minutes. Does she feel that the Government should be proud of what they have done? What she has just said is very nice, but should we not be prepared to challenge them?

Rosie Duffield: What the hon. Member for Chelmsford said sounds fantastic—really good news. However, in my constituency, the lack of jobcentres—they have closed recently—severely impacts on the sort of access that I am talking about. It would be great if that did not happen.

The Centre for Welfare Reform found that austerity has been targeted at disabled people nine times more than the general population, and at severely disabled people 19 times more. Such statistics are shocking. The targeted austerity measures put in place by the Government are clearly unusually cruel in that regard.

The UN recommendations under article 28 state that UK law should ensure that welfare policies protect the income levels of disabled people and their families—the key word there is “protect”. I want to know what the Government think they are doing to protect such income levels and to protect disabled people from having to beg for help from friends, families and food banks in order to stave off poverty, dire need and hunger.

The Government must also ensure that that local authorities have enough funds to support disabled people. Also under article 28, the UN committee’s report is critical of how the squeezing of local authority funding impacts on disabled people. I only need to think of the shocking state of some social housing provision for people in my constituency. For example, one woman who is a full-time wheelchair user—I shall call her Janet—came to my office for help. Janet had been confined to her council flat for months and months. She had been housed on a high floor of a housing block. The flat was not adapted or good enough. My office had been housed on a high floor of a housing block. The flat was not adapted or good enough. My office was pleased to help to secure her move when she needed our help, but for every Janet out there we know about, 10 other people are forced to make do in private with inadequate social housing.

It is important to remember that such inequalities experienced by disabled people in our community are intersectional. The UN committee expressed concern about a lack of legislation in UK law to prevent intersectional discrimination. Intersectional disadvantage means that a person experiences multiple disadvantages from different discriminations at the same time. It is horrifying enough that—according the Disabled Living Foundation—the average income of families with disabled children is £15,270, or 23.5% below the UK mean income of £19,968, but for a single mother who faces other difficulties such as the gender pay gap or limited child welfare because of cuts, those hardships will be so much worse.

On article 7, the UN committee’s report called on the UK Government to cut the high levels of poverty among families with disabled children. Will the Minister tell me what monitoring there has been in that respect? Does she feel that the Government should be proud of recent statistics relating to family poverty where one or more of the children is disabled? It is not just families who are affected; the onslaught of cuts and austerity unscrupulously enforced by the Conservative Government has left many single disabled adults, and couples in which one or more of the couple is disabled, struggling to obtain and access the bare necessities.

A well-known topic that adversely affects disabled people throughout the UK is the flawed roll-out and poor implementation of the personal independence payments scheme. The many statistics and stories that we regularly hear are simply gut-wrenching. As a result of PIP assessments, 80% of disabled people’s health has deteriorated because of stress or anxiety. A third of those who experience funding cuts as a result of the outcome of the test have struggled to pay for food, rent and basic utilities.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She talked about cuts, but does she welcome the Government’s increase in the amount of the access to work fund from £42,000 to £57,200? People with disabilities can access that fund to get themselves into work. I led a debate in this Chamber on the Disability Confident scheme, and I invite her to sign up to it, as I am sure other Members have done.

Rosie Duffield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, but the cap is still quite low and it is difficult for people to get beyond that.

It sounds too simple to say that problems with PIP assessments cause poverty, but it is true. Those statistics bear witness to that fact. The trauma caused by the PIP assessment process and the ramifications of losing welfare provision are even more infuriating, because 69% of decisions made by PIP assessment bodies are overturned by our courts. I hear about this every single week from my constituents. If 69% of decisions are challenged and later found out to be wrong, the original system is not just broken; it is wholly inadequate.

Vicky Ford: I agree that for some people the PIP assessment has been severely challenging, but only 4% of cases are now being appealed, because the process has improved. [Interruption.] Does the hon. Lady agree that continual improvement is needed, and that we should work to have PIP assessments recorded, when the claimant wishes, so that the claimant can have greater confidence in the process?

Rosie Duffield: I thank the hon. Lady for her point, but as my colleagues are saying, people often give up on the process because it is simply too distressing and stressful. I have not heard any success cases in my surgery. People are really distressed by this.
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): In Liverpool, when a constituent tries to appeal one of the rulings of an assessment centre, there is a nine-month wait at Liverpool tribunal services. The case that I raised with the Prime Minister of my constituent Anthony has been resolved individually, but thousands of constituents are affected.

Rosie Duffield: I have heard of similar waiting times, too. It is really distressing and adds to all the trauma that has been going on. I will give an example: Julius Holgate, who is a double leg amputee, won an appeal. The Department for Work and Pensions told him that he was fit to work because he could “climb stairs with his arms.”

Because he lost his benefits, Julius resorted to selling his belongings in order to survive. The DWP claims that this was a clerical error, but in reality, it was an error caused by a lack of humanity.

Article 28 of the UN recommendations calls on the UK Government to ensure that all eligibility criteria and assessments for PIP, employment and support allowance and universal credit are in line with the social model of disability. When is that being done? Despite the repeated, serious and notorious assessment failures by Atos and Capita—the outsourced companies that conduct the assessment—the Government have renewed their contracts to run the assessment process for two more years. These organisations have repeatedly failed to meet their target of 97% acceptable tests, and 100,000 people have won appeals against their assessments. How much is this flawed system costing the Government? If we ignore the human element just for a second and question how much each reassessment and court challenge costs, surely we can agree that this money would be better spent on rolling out decent provisions for the disabled and on remedying those affronts to human rights by introducing a holistic, bespoke assessment service that includes a home visit.

The PIP assessment system is highly traumatic and often misassesses; in January of this year, it was ruled by our own courts to be severely in need of remedy and review. In January this year, the High Court ruled that the PIP system is “blatantly discriminatory” against people with mental health conditions. That criticism is echoed by many mental health and disability organisations. I am sure we all appreciate that not all wounds and injuries are necessarily physical and observable. A single-day assessment is therefore a ludicrous way of properly gauging whether a person is in need of financial assistance because of mental health conditions.

It is high time that this Government turned their focus away from tax breaks for bankers towards a system of disability welfare that is, at the very least, in line with basic human rights outlined by the UN. The convention needs to become part of UK law. The UN committee noted last year that there had not been a full review of the UK’s laws and policies in the light of the convention. There is not enough information on what the UK is doing to stop disabled people being negatively affected as the UK leaves the EU. A statement by Inclusion London explains:

“Disabled People’s organisations are seriously disappointed by the Government response and its failure to adequately take on board any of the UN inquiry recommendations. This response brings into question the Government’s commitment to the progressive realisation of Disabled people’s rights.”

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. She has used phrases such as “targeted austerity” and “lack of humanity”, but will she not join me in welcoming the fact that disability benefits spending is at its highest level ever, and that it will continue to be higher than it was in 2010 every year up to 2022?

Rosie Duffield: We all know that in real terms that is not the case, because the cost of living is constantly rising. I do not hear from my constituents who struggle to pay the bills that their lives are any easier—in fact, the opposite is true. We have to disagree on that one.

Since the committee’s investigation in October 2015, further measures have been introduced that have or will have further adverse impacts on disabled people. They include the cut to ESA for those in the work-related activity group that is due to come into force in April 2017 and further cuts to local authorities’ social care budgets.

I call on the Government to develop and implement a plan of action that abolishes any laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against disabled people. Imagine losing your livelihood as a result of a flawed assessment that is not your fault. Imagine going hungry, living in poverty and being under so much stress that it severely affects your wellbeing. Most of us in this room will never have to experience that, but most of us are not already living with the challenges of disability.

I call on this Government to begin taking seriously the poverty and discrimination experiences of disabled people and those who care for loved ones with disability. I call on this Government, as a bare minimum, to honour their commitment to human rights, by accepting and acting on the recommendations provided by the UN inquiry. The protection of human rights is a sacred function of the state and we are in breach of that function. It is not the time to deny facts, ignore inequality and dismiss the well-documented experiences of our citizens. It is time to act. I urge the Minister to do just that.

I thank hon. Members for listening. I am sure many colleagues wish to speak because, as I said at the beginning, there are so many recommendations that we could cover in this debate. Each recommendation and article is important and each is deserving of its own debate.

9.48 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) on securing an important debate.

The hon. Lady mentioned the problems created by the closure of jobcentres. There are other similar cases. For example, my own constituency has no jobcentre at all—the jobcentres are in neighbouring Oxford, Abingdon or Reading—but rather than moan about that and point out the difficulties that that creates, I have been working with the Secretary of State to try to put in place a solution to overcome it. That solution is a system of mobile jobcentres, the model for which is the way the Post Office runs its mobile post offices around the country. I envisage a situation where, in areas where a jobcentre has closed or there is no jobcentre, jobcentre vans turn up on certain days—they would have to be
regular days—to provide the services and advice that many people want. I am happy to recommend that model to hon. Members—as I said, I am already working with the Secretary of State to try to get it ready.

My second point is about PIP. In a number of cases—I say this quite openly—PIP has been delivered appallingly slowly. Again, I have been working with the Secretary of State to look at how those payments can be sped up and at how information can be better integrated into how PIP is delivered, so that we do not continually knock the system but try our best to improve it.

My motivation for speaking in the debate was to highlight the excellent work done in my constituency by the Ways and Means Trust and its Greenshoots nursery, which provides excellent help to people with a whole range of disabilities, including mental disabilities, on how to do work. It provides lectures in various areas to try to give people a basic intellectual grasp of what they need to do, and it provides people with the physical work experience to be able to take that forward. I am sure that everyone looks forward to Christmas, for a range of reasons, but I look forward to it in particular because it means I can go to Greenshoots to get the wreath for my front door—they are made there in a particularly spectacular way.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to this important debate. Does he agree that we have moved on since the UN report, which the Government refuted? Does he also agree that it is good that through the Disability Confident scheme 600,000 disabled people have secured employment and the dignity it brings? That must surely be a good thing—and that has happened in the past four years.

John Howell: My hon. Friend is quite right—it is very important to mention that. I will say something about the Disability Confident scheme in a moment.

Let me finish what I was saying about the Greenshoots nursery, because it is important. My hon. Friend highlighted the importance of dignity in employment. That is important for people who might otherwise be disadvantaged from taking employment. From what I have seen, Greenshoots delivers a tremendous boost to people’s confidence, wellbeing and ability to provide for themselves.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Prior to coming to this place, I was the main development worker for Social Firms England, which supported enterprising charities, such as the one the hon. Gentleman describes, to support disabled people into work. Social Firms England was decimated by cuts. Social Firms Scotland and Social Firms Wales were active and well supported, but I was the only worker for Social Firms England, and I worked one day a week. That was it—that was all the support it had. Social firms are going to the wall. That is what is happening to disability support. Remploy was also cut. Support for getting disabled people into work has actually been decimated in the past eight years—it has not moved forward.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions really must be short. I have been very generous, but I will not remind you all again.

John Howell: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I do not accept that there has been that level of cuts to charities in my constituency, or that cuts are having such an appalling effect on people with disabilities, who are continuing their work.

A wide range of companies and organisations are involved in providing these services. We have the likes of Microsoft and Glaxo, we have slightly smaller companies that are nevertheless household names, such as Sainsbury’s, and we have a range of individual organisations, such as the Greenshoots nursery, Leonard Cheshire and indeed Mencap, which provide assistance to people with disabilities in my constituency.

To pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), more than 6,500 employers are involved in the Disability Confident scheme, and that is to be celebrated. I am pleased to say that all main Government Departments have now achieved Disability Confident leader status, which is to be welcomed.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the number of disabled people in work. It is important that we give our constituents the facts. Opposition Members have used very emotive language. I know from having a family member who has been disabled and from the number of cases that my office works through how disruptive PIP assessments can be. We need to cut through to get to the facts and look at turning the screw on Atos and the other companies that deliver these services. It is not a genuine intention of the Government to be inhumane, but there has been a failure of administration by some of the companies that we have employed to deliver services.

John Howell: I am sorry, Dame Cheryl, for allowing things right, and I am pleased that I have been able to do that.

Vicky Ford: Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Howell: Of course—provided my hon. Friend is brief.

Vicky Ford: This time last year I got a lot of cases from constituents who had problems with the PIP assessment process, but it appears to have improved. I fundamentally believe that it would be better if it were easier to get those assessments recorded. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would put more trust in the system?

John Howell: I do—my hon. Friend has got this right. We can all help with that. I will not claim responsibility for the improvement in PIP, but I think that all of us who have worked with the Department and the Secretary
of State to do that can claim some responsibility for the improvement in the process. We need to do more to make that work.

With those remarks, Dame Cheryl, I will sit down and allow the debate to move on before anyone else intervenes at length.

9.59 am

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I apologise in advance, because I have some parliamentary business to attend to, so I may not be able to stay for the winding-up speeches.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) for introducing such an important debate. The points that have been made have been both interesting and troubling. I say that because, while I understand the facts and figures presented, the reality experienced in my constituency is very different. I will tell some of the stories that constituents of mine have shared with me, giving first names but not surnames.

I was approached by a constituent called Hugh, who has T-cell psoriasis in his hands and feet. He struggles to dress himself without great discomfort, and when I met him he could not lift a cup of coffee with both hands. Walking can be difficult for him. He was found to be fit for work.

Gloria is 71 years old, with arthritis in her legs. She lives on the second floor of a building with no lift and struggles with stairs. She lives with a grown-up son who has learning difficulties—although he has a job. With regard to her housing, she was told that she cannot be moved to any higher band as her son works, so they consider him to live independently.

Victoria has severe mobility issues and sepsis in her legs. At her first assessment, the disability element was reduced as she could prepare her own meals and wash herself with installations at home. Her condition has since got worse, but she was refused PIP and the PIP assessment at home. She was granted an assessment only when my office intervened.

Harry was working in the Navy. He sustained a brain injury so is not able to work. He suffers from severe depression and anxiety as well as the brain injury. The PIP assessor said in his assessment that he was “too aggressive” and ignorant of his mental health conditions. PIP was declined as a result. Those are just a few of the people I come across, so warm words or advising about more money that can be accessed is not helpful at all.

I was tearful when I spoke with this last person. She explained that she had had four strokes—four strokes. She was expected to do a work capability assessment, and because she touched her face during the assessment, the assessors said she was able to work; in fact, they did not believe that she was as paralysed as had been said. That is what we come across as Members of Parliament.

We are not standing here to say that this is unfair just to represent the Opposition and be against what the Government have set out, but the fact remains that it is unfair. The disabled people I represent believe they are “the forgotten class”. Where are they when we look at assessments? I agree with the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) that assessments should be recorded, because the way in which assessors put questions across is bad. For example, assessors say, “Can you walk 50 metres?” but how far is that? We do not look at that. Another of my constituents, who has Asperger’s, was told, “You can walk 50 metres, can’t you?” so he said, “Yes,” not understanding the impact that would have.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury said, the four recommendations on article 27 have not been taken on board. We talk about facts, but how many of the recommendations have been implemented? How many people have to go under the radar, unnoticed and unhelped, and fight, going for appeals with no deadline or timeframe for how long they will wait for their appeal to be heard? They are supposed just to get on with life.

It is not enough to say, “We are trying to encourage disabled people into work.” That is applaudable and honourable, and I agree with that when they can work, but many disabled people cannot work and are not only penalised for sometimes having a physical disability that prohibits them from working; but we say, “We know you need financial assistance—this welfare—but we’re not going to give it to you until you can prove to us how disabled you are.” Something is wrong there.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady is making a passionate and cogent speech. Does she accept that the vast majority of disabled people do want to move into work? While welcoming the 600,000 who have already done so, does she agree that that is just a start and that we should look to close the disability employment gap in its entirety?

Fiona Onasanya: Let me be clear. It is good that disabled people want to get into work, and this is a start. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. Where we differ is on disabled people who are not able to work who have to fight to prove that. I do not agree with that. It is not correct; it is against their human rights.

I am not saying that those who can work should not work but that we should listen to what those who cannot work are saying. They are going through assessments. I have a constituent who had four strokes and is physically disabled, yet because she touched her face she is told she can work. Something is wrong there. Something is wrong with a double amputee being told they can climb the stairs with their hands. That is what needs to be addressed.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly passionate speech with which I am completely in agreement. The assessments really need reviewing. My constituent wanted a home visit because he struggles even to leave his house. On the first appointment, he fell outside his door, so he could not get there. For the second appointment, which the assessors agreed to give, he struggled to get the buses—transport was slow and delayed—but he got there. They refused to see him because he was three minutes late. He did not get his assessment. The system urgently needs changing.

Fiona Onasanya: I agree that the system needs changing. My concern is that if there are recommendations that could make a process better or even more streamlined, why would they not be adopted? I do not have the details of the situation of my hon. Friend’s constituents, but I do not understand why his assessment would be refused for being three minutes late.
We are all in agreement on seeking to help those who need assistance, but why are recommendations that would make the process easier and more streamlined not being taken on board? Why are we not looking at people’s rights? We are all one race—the human race—so why are we not looking at people and saying, “You need assistance.”? It is a bit like a body: if in a big society—to coin a phrase from the Government—something is not functioning correctly, why do we not stop and rectify it? Why do we just say, “Actually, don’t worry about that,” and carry on? That is how it comes across to our constituents.

Vicky Ford: Has the hon. Lady ever taken part in a work capability assessment? I had one acted out for me to allow me to understand the process, which was enormously helpful. I would recommend that other Members do that. One can either sit through an assessment or have the process demonstrated. It was really helpful to aid one’s understanding.

Fiona Onasanya: Sorry, Dame Cheryl, I realise that time is short, so I will be quick. I have not been to a work capability assessment, but one of the people I work with who was a barrister goes to many assessments to advocate on behalf of disabled people, because the assessments are not very clear and the way in which questions are asked can be quite misleading. That is how I was able to give the analogy about the distance in metres.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good speech with many good points. I believe the Government have been listening, and the Minister is very much aware of some of the shortcomings in the assessment process and has worked incredibly hard to try to rectify them. Is she willing to acknowledge that the Government have listened to the concerns of Members across the House and improvements are being made to the process?

Fiona Onasanya: No, I do not agree. The Government are hearing, but they are absolutely not listening. If they were listening, they would implement the recommendations.

Bill Grant: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I will not give way because my colleagues still wish to speak.

The UN committee stated that cuts to social protection in the UK were “a human catastrophe”—a catastrophe! The UK’s human rights watchdog stated that the examination by the UN had seen a “disconnect” between the UK Government’s replies and the “lived experiences” of disabled people. That is what we are hearing, despite Government Members saying that everything is hunkydory. In conclusion, the rapporteur stated that the committee was “deeply concerned about the lack of recognition of the findings and recommendations of the conducted inquiry”.

The Government have said that they will not act on that report, but it is not the only such report. Indeed, the Council of Europe has also stated that it has significant concerns regarding upholding the rights of disabled people.

The Minister has said that the Government will set up a new inter-ministerial group to co-ordinate work across the Government and seek to reinvigorate our engagement with disability stakeholders to help shape our plans. Will she confirm what that engagement will involve, including which deaf and disabled people’s organisations will be engaged, as repeatedly recommended by the UN? Will she publish details of the membership and terms of reference for that group and say whether it will extend to the Department of Health and Social Care? There are real concerns that the consultation on the Green Paper on adult social care, which includes support for disabled people, is failing to engage with DDPOs.
The response to a question that I asked in the debate on social care on 25 April shows a complete lack of understanding about article 19 of the convention and what is meant by independent living. Last year, the UN disability committee brought out a general comment on article 19, in which it referred to how institutionalisation can occur in people’s own homes. People can become isolated and separated from society if they are not given that basic support, and we are effectively seeing the re-institutionalisation of disabled people due to current cuts to social care. Waiting until autumn to see the Green Paper on adult social care, as has been suggested, is not good enough. Some £7 billion has been cut from social care, and 1.2 million people, including disabled people, are not getting the support they need. To their shame, the Government’s failure to recognise and act on the social care crisis is affecting our most vulnerable citizens.

Finally, will the Government consider producing a cumulative impact assessment of all their policies on disabled people and their impact since 2010, as recommended by many organisations? It is time for a different approach, and that is summarised in the manifesto that we developed with and for disabled people: “Nothing about you, without you.” I know my hon. Friends are building on that commitment, which includes scrapping current disability assessments and replacing them with an holistic, person-centred approach that is based on the principles of dignity and inclusion. We have already committed to incorporating the UN CRPD fully into UK law—something that was rejected by this Government. We believe that, like the NHS, our social security system is there for every one of us. Nine out of 10 disabled people, and others. As we know, the National

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I would like to start the winding-up speeches at 10.30 am, so if hon. Members can bear that in mind I would be absolutely delighted.

10.17 am

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) on her excellent speech.

I wish to focus on the effect of universal credit on disabled people, and others. As we know, the National Audit Office has released a report ahead of the roll-out of universal credit, stating that the new benefits cost more to administer than the previous system of the six benefits it replaced, which include jobseeker’s allowance, tax credits, housing benefit, personal independence payment, and employment and support allowance. The spending watchdog also said that it was uncertain whether universal credit would ever deliver value for money. The report proves that the assertion by the Department for Work and Pensions that everything is going well is false, as many of my constituents in Hartlepool can testify.

Hartlepool was one of the early implementers of universal credit. My office is informed about issues with universal credit on a daily basis, and many people in the town have become accustomed to that unjust and arbitrary system. Some have not just experienced hardship, but suffered near destitution through delayed payments or through sanctions that affect all six benefits, not just one, which mean that they experience a drop in the level of benefit that they receive compared with the income derived from previous benefits. Hon. Members will be aware of the recent High Court judgment on the roll-out of the new payment system. Two severely disabled men, one of whom is a constituent of mine, experienced unlawful discrimination when their benefits were significantly reduced after moving from one area to another, and subsequently on to universal credit. My constituent, who can be identified only by the initials AR, is 36 years old and moved from Middlesbrough to Hartlepool in 2017. AR has severe mental health problems and was forced to move because he could no longer afford the property where he was living, because of the bedroom tax. Unfortunately for him, he moved to an area where universal credit was already being rolled out and was therefore required to make a claim under the new scheme. Both my constituent and the other complainant were advised by DWP staff that their benefit entitlement would not change. However, they experienced a monthly drop of £178 under universal credit. Following the judgment, their solicitor Tessa Gregory from Leigh Day said:

“Nothing about either of the claimants’ disability or care needs changed. They were simply unfortunate enough to need to move local authorities into a universal credit full service area. The Government need to halt the roll out and completely overhaul the system to meet people’s needs, not condemn them to destitution. If this doesn’t happen, further legal challenges will inevitably follow.”

Universal credit has taken significantly longer than intended to roll out and it may cost more—as determined by the NAO—than the benefits system it replaces. Also, the DWP will never be able to measure properly whether it has achieved its stated goal of increasing employment. On the contrary, thanks partly to the fact that universal credit covers a broader span of claimants who are required to look for work—such as the disabled—than jobseeker’s allowance does, the count of the number of unemployed people in “full service” areas has been inflated. Because of that, my constituency currently holds the unenviable record of having the highest rate of unemployment in the country. The total number of unemployed claimants there in May 2018 was 4,080, which is 9.6% of the economically active population of the town. The UK average is 2.8%. I am confident that when universal credit is rolled out across other constituencies, we will lose that unwanted title, particularly as I am proud to say that our figures for youth unemployment are among the best in the UK.

The NAO report concludes that the DWP has not shown significant sensitivity towards some claimants, and it does not know how many claimants are having problems with the programme or whether they have suffered hardship, as in the case of AR. In 2017, about a quarter of new claims were not paid in full or on time. Late payments were delayed on average by four weeks between January and October of that year, with 40% of those affected waiting for 11 weeks or more, and 20% waiting for about five months. Never mind the abled-bodied—just imagine the effect on disabled people. The report is talking about my constituents and a system
that renders people homeless, destitute and desperate. It is simply unacceptable—chaotic and catastrophic. I pity those in other areas who are about to feel its full force.

10.21 am

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) on securing such an important debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) hit the nail on the head in her speech: the report is a condemnation of the Government. It cannot be emphasised enough just how damning the 2016 UN report is. Conservative Members can talk all they want, with weasel words, about the system getting better, but we know that that is not the case—certainly not in constituencies such as mine in north Liverpool, which is one of the most deprived in the country. I want to tell the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) that we have had our two jobcentres closed. The council has worked so hard—tirelessly—to develop co-location plans and put any proposal in front of the Government to save those jobcentres, to absolutely no avail. I wish him better in Henley, but it certainly has not worked in north Liverpool.

The chairwoman of the UN’s Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities described the Government’s treatment of sick and disabled people as a “human catastrophe”. That is not poetry or a rhetorical flourish; that language is used deliberately and precisely, based on the weight of evidence behind the report. That report came to the conclusion that the Government’s welfare cuts have resulted in “grave and systematic violations” of the human rights of disabled people. It is a national scandal, and one that I see in my surgeries every single week. I am going to talk about a few cases that I have had to deal with in recent months. The situation should be a wake-up call to the Government, but they learn no lessons. My constituency casework is loaded with complaints relating to personal independence payments. Instead of supporting people, the process is dehumanising and inaccurate, and it exacerbates the health conditions that my constituents suffer from.

It is no surprise that there is widespread distrust of the assessment, when 68% of PIP decisions that are taken to tribunals are overturned. As I said earlier, that means a nine-month wait to get the right decision and, often, to get the original decision overturned. In that time people lose their mobility vehicles—at what cost to Government, when they must return them? Something that I have seen happen in the system—and I wonder whether it is systematic—is people going from a low rate of care with high mobility to a high rate of care with low mobility. That seems to happen in case after case, because if someone’s care rate goes up they get a couple of quid extra a week, but if they lose their high-rate mobility they lose their car and their ability to leave the house—they lose their ability to exist.

At Prime Minister’s questions on 25 April, at column 879, I challenged the Prime Minister on a specific case—that of Anthony, who has a chronic, debilitating illness. After his PIP assessment he had a nine-month wait. Once that was raised in Parliament, the DWP intervened to overturn the decision. However, I see that every week—the Prime Minister is asked about this issue, and it is always an individual case. Well, it is not an individual case—it is built into the system. I should like to know what work the Minister is doing with the Ministry of Justice about tribunal waits. Is she working on that? There must be investment in the court system if the problem is to be resolved. I do not see any work being done on it at all.

The Government’s contractors, Atos, Capita and Maximus, have consistently failed to meet basic performance standards. One of my constituents was asked by an assessor about her cerebral palsy—a lifelong condition from birth. She was asked how long she had had it and whether it would get better. What on earth is going on, and what do the Government do when such cases are brought to light? Several other people have told me that the information in their assessment report was inaccurate and did not reflect what was said in the assessment, but for some of my constituents even getting that far is a challenge. My office has been inundated with reports of the unsuitability of assessment centres for disabled people. The range of problems includes a lack of suitable parking, no drop-kerb for wheelchairs and no disabled access button to open doors. A report released this month by Muscular Dystrophy UK found that two in five respondents had been sent to an assessment centre that was not accessible for disabled people. You could not make this stuff up. It is not a matter of individual cases, one by one. There is a systemic problem at the heart of the Government’s policy, and until they wake up to that fact nothing will improve.

Bill Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dan Carden: I will not.

The pointless reassessments of people with severe, long-term or progressive conditions are cruel, and an absurd waste of resources. I have a constituent with Down’s syndrome whose payments stopped after she was transferred to PIP, as did those of another constituent, who has multiple sclerosis. I welcome the announcement this week that the Government are preparing to end such unnecessary reviews of people with severe or progressive conditions, but that should not have taken the determined effort of disability campaigners. The Government need to understand that what they are doing is already debilitating for the people in question. Having to be part of national and local campaigns just to get basic human dignity in the assessment process is outrageous.

In any case, it is it is simply not enough to tinker around the edges. The truth is that all the problems are not glitches in the system. They are the system itself. Research published this month by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that almost 650,000 people with physical or mental health problems were destitute in the UK last year. That means being so poor that they cannot afford essentials such as heating, regular meals or basic toiletries. The systematic impoverishment and denial of basic rights highlighted in the UN report and others are part of what we now know to be a “hostile environment”, not just in one or two Departments but across the board. If a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable, what does that say about ours?
We must treat disabled people, and the vulnerable or dispossessed, with dignity, and it is absurd to think that we can achieve that when we have a programme of austerity and cuts in local authorities and across the board. That is what the report signals. Not only does the Government’s austerity agenda harm communities and society; it hits the most vulnerable and the poorest hardest.

10.29 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, particularly given all the excellent work you have done over the years for people with autism and on the all-party parliamentary group. I thank the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who made an excellent, detailed and thorough speech. The empathy she feels for her constituents and the hard work she will do in the constituency on their behalf were clear. I particularly thank her for bringing this important debate to be heard today.

I thank all the hon. Members who contributed by reminding us that some progress is being made, particularly in employment and with the Disability Confident scheme, and that further employers are signing up. It is important that we make progress with that scheme, but I would caution that I am aware that an employer can sign up and, I believe, reach the full level without employing anyone with a disability. Further progress is required in that regard.

I also thank all hon. Members who contributed for outlining the widespread failings in the system, giving constituency case examples to show the impact on the people they are trying to help, and highlighting where the issues lie—not simply to berate the Government, but to suggest areas where we need to work collectively to take things forward. We must work collectively to improve the lives of people with disability across the United Kingdom, to ensure that they reach their full potential.

We are all aware that the reason we are here is that the optional protocol allowed the United Nations committee to investigate a state party if it received “reliable information” of “grave or systematic violations” of the convention. The UK is the first country to be investigated by the UN under this convention. I believe that brings great shame, but it is also a warning and a call to improve where we are. We must grasp that and stridently take it forward. The report published on 6 October 2016 found that reforms have led to grave and systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities, emphasising in particular changes to housing benefit entitlement, eligibility for PIP and social care, and the ending of the independent living fund.

I am aware that the Government have challenged the veracity of the report, but it must be said that it was based on thorough research, with visits across all four nations of the United Kingdom, interviews with more than 200 people and the collection of more than 3,000 pieces of documentary evidence. Where facts were disputed, they were cross-checked with collateral sources, including national statistics and parliamentary inquiry reports. Although hon. Members may wish to challenge the report, it is thorough and detailed. While the Government have not conducted the cumulative impact assessment on disabled people to challenge the report, we have to take it and its findings and view them very seriously, and ensure that the system is overhauled in a positive way that changes the lives of people with disability.

The subject of welfare benefits has been thoroughly covered today, so I will just touch briefly on it. The Access to Work fund is a good scheme, but it requires much further publication to increase awareness. Many people in my constituency and beyond, whom I have spoken to through the all-party parliamentary group for disability, were not aware of it. Where a scheme has the potential to assist people, we should ensure that they can access it.

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and her point about Access to Work is absolutely right. Of the 4 million disabled people who want and are able to work, 25,000 have had support through Access to Work on a yearly basis. It is just not adequate.

Dr Cameron: Perhaps, where things are assisting, we need to look at rolling them out and generalising them to ensure that those who need that system can access it. It is an irony indeed that people cannot access Access to Work.

I will speak briefly on the need for medical collateral information to be accepted and routinely sought in welfare assessments. I feel that often those assessments are conducted in a way that perhaps does not lend itself to getting the adequate information. People may not be aware that they can bring that information, or they may not understand the system properly, but it is crucial. Often people who come to be assessed are anxious and stressed; they may not be able to explain in the best way the extent of their difficulties, but having that collateral information can be valuable in ensuring that an accurate assessment is undertaken in the first place and the individual does not have to go through the stress of appeals processes, which have such a devastating impact.

The Scottish Government intend to place dignity and respect at the heart of the welfare system. That is obviously in transition, but it is a great aspiration and something that we should aspire to across the four nations. I ask the Minister to look at the “Ahead of the ARC” inquiry that the all-party parliamentary group for disability completed last year. It points out a number of important areas, including access to training in job sectors, particularly those that will be sectors of the future and where jobs are likely to be found. The Government have made some movements on apprenticeships, and I am grateful for that, but I think much more can be done.

Public procurement should reward businesses that provide inclusive employment opportunities, to ensure that procurement contracts are not just awarded on cost, but look at equality legislation and inclusion wherever possible. We also need to be mindful that when we think of people with disabilities, the stereotype is often that they are unemployed or work for someone else; we need to also think about maximising skills and potential and looking at further opportunities for entrepreneurs who have disabilities. That could offer a flexible work pattern, which might suit many people, but it would also harness the skills and abilities of many people who perhaps are not already in the workplace, and who wish to take that forward, employ other people and contribute greatly to our economy. Let us try to change the rhetoric.
In the minute I have left, I make a plea to the Minister on Motability. People are losing their Motability cars; is there any opportunity for people to retain their cars during the appeal process rather than losing them? I recently had a constituent who had won their appeal, but had already taken out a loan for a car, and was left with a Motability car and a massive loan at the end of the process. Surely that is not something that should be happening when the process was faulty in the first place.

Tracy Brabin: The announcement of £20 million for the Jo Cox loneliness fund is very welcome, but is it not counter-intuitive that on the one hand the Government are offering this sort of money to combat loneliness while on the other hand they are taking away mobility cars?

Dr Cameron: Yes, we must ensure inclusion and that people can be independent and live as independently as possible.

The final point I will make before sitting down is that with the closure of banks right across the United Kingdom, many people feel vulnerable going to mobile banks. When I spoke to the Royal Bank of Scotland, I was told that it does not even have ramps for its vans, so the mobile vans are not accessible. Is that something the Minister could have a dialogue about, with RBS in particular and with other banks? People with disabilities have told me they feel vulnerable getting money from a mobile van in an open setting, even when they can access it, and they are fearful that it may place them at risk. Those are some of the practical issues we need to take forward to improve people’s lives.

10.39 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), first for securing this important debate and secondly for the incredibly powerful speech she gave. She was right to highlight that no Government should introduce legislation that discriminates against disabled people. She rightly stated that the Government’s record is a national shame, and highlighted the dire inequalities in social security and access to justice, the increase in poverty, and the lack of access to information. There are huge difficulties in access to digital information, as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea pointed out. Friend the Member for Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) highlighted, and alternative formats for people living with sight loss are lacking. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury was right to call out the fact that there is a lack of legislation covering intersectional discrimination.

I also want to pay tribute to some of my other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Members for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) made a powerful speech. She has led the way and has held the Government to account powerfully for many years. I thank her for all the work she has done and will continue to do. She rightly highlighted that the Government chose not to include the charter of fundamental rights in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which is a shame. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) shared the powerful testimonies of some of her constituents. I thank everybody for all their efforts. It is right to point out that this is a shame, and there is no other way of looking at it.

The UK was once at the forefront of disability rights: 48 years ago, we passed the groundbreaking Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970. It was led by Lord Alf Morris, who shortly afterwards became the first Minister for Disabled People—I am honoured to be in that shadow role today. That legislation was a response to disability campaigners calling attention to the deep and pervasive injustices that disabled people face. In December 2007, we became signatories to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which committed us to progressively realising the rights of disabled people—our rights to live independently, to be included in the community and to have access to education and justice. After eight years of brutal Tory cuts to disabled people’s social security, of increasingly cruel and degrading assessments and sanctions, and of being stigmatised by Government Ministers, disabled people know that the Government have not been defending our rights. The UN CRPD committee found that disabled people’s rights have been “gravely and systematically violated”: it is difficult to overstate the significance of that judgment.

The UK was not merely the first country to be found in breach of the convention’s obligations; we were the first ever to be investigated. Over the past eight years, we have seen not the progressive implementation of disabled people’s rights, but their unprecedented erosion and violation. The committee found that Departments are grossly failing disabled people.

The brutal cuts to disabled people’s social security have made a mockery of article 19, on the right to live independently and in the community, and article 28, on the right to an adequate standard of living. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 alone cut £28 billion from social security. Half of people in poverty are now either disabled or living with someone who is disabled. Almost a quarter of disabled people are now forced to miss meals because of economic hardship, and one in five cannot pay to heat their homes. Such drastic cuts to social security led the UN committee to find that disabled people were the single biggest group affected by Tory austerity policies.

The UN said that the systematic impoverishment of disabled people was an entirely predictable effect of the Government’s austerity policies. It was, of course, predicted by disability groups, but the Government ignored it and refused to carry out a full cumulative impact assessment of the cuts.

Dan Carden: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is disappointing and outrageous that the Government have wasted more than £100 million on pointless appeals and on putting disabled people through a nightmare as they try to access the benefits they deserve?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Will the Government commit to carry out a cumulative assessment of their tax and social security reforms since 2010? In addition to the devastating cuts and suspicion, disabled people have been endlessly mistreated by the chaotic Department for Work and Pensions. High Court
judgments have repeatedly found that the DWP has blatantly discriminated against disabled people. Only last week, it was found that the cutting of disability premiums from universal credit was “unlawfully discriminatory”. There has been “blatant discrimination”, against PIP claimants, and employment and support allowance has been continuously underpaid.

The UN report found that disabled people are being undermined not just by the social security failings, but by the lack of social care funding. Since 2009, the number of disabled people receiving social care has fallen by nearly 30%. The UN report highlights that social care is vital, and that it allows many disabled people to live independently. Will the Minister outline whether the Government’s forthcoming Green Paper will include working-age adults? I asked the Secretary of State for Health that question on Monday but did not get a full answer.

On the right to work, the Government have not done enough to remove the barriers that disabled people face. There is a lack of high-quality impairment-specific support. The Government’s flagship Disability Confident scheme does not measure the number of disabled people it has directly helped to move into work. Access to Work must be improved, extended and better publicised. Will the Minister consider removing the discriminatory cap?

Signatories to the CRPD are obliged to promote inclusive education. Under the Government, there has been regression and an increase in the number of special school places. What is the Minister doing to encourage her colleagues to improve inclusive education? In recent months, the Government have created a cross-ministerial body that is supposed to promote disability issues across Government, but at the same time they have cut the number of staff at the Office for Disability Issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth asked, what is the group’s scope? Where are its published terms of reference?

The Government are helping to organise a global summit in July, but why should any other state take them seriously on disability rights when they are systematically violating the rights of disabled people and continue to ignore the UN’s recommendations? When will the Government publish their response to the UN’s report?

When we get into power, the Labour Government will incorporate the convention into UK law, scrap the punitive sanctions regime, and replace the assessment regime with a more holistic, supportive assessment framework. It is a shame on the Government that we have to stand here today and debate this issue once again. They must take heed and listen.

10.48 am

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, as you have taken a lifelong interest in disabled people and made a personal difference by introducing the first piece of legislation specifically supporting people with autism. I congratulate the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) on securing her first Westminster Hall debate. Given the way she has approached it, I am sure it will not be the last. After the Government publish our response to the UN inquiry, I will be more than happy to come back to this Chamber to debate it with her.

Before I respond to the individual points that hon. Members made, let me say that, like everyone else in this Chamber, I want to ensure that every disabled person and person with a health condition in our country has the opportunity to play a full part in society, including at work, when they can do so. Of course, there are disabled people who cannot work, and they must be supported. However, I utterly refute the allegations that the Government have discriminated against disabled people, systematically undermined and violated their human rights and, worst of all, that we are targeting their welfare support.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I have so little time and have been asked so many questions that I will not take an intervention.

The Government are utterly committed to the convention. Britain helped to develop and shape it, and we were one of the first countries in the world to sign and ratify it, in 2009. We are one of the very few nations that also ratified the convention’s optional protocol, which allows for individual complaints to be raised and permits the UN committee to investigate allegations of violations of the convention. That is what happened, and it was the first time it had happened. We were disappointed that the UN representatives who came to the UK simply did not take on board the evidence that the Government gave them and did not acknowledge the full range of support.

When we set out our response—I will set it out in full—we will clearly make our case and rebut the allegations levelled against us. We firmly believe that a disability or health condition should not dictate the path a person is able to take in life, including in society or in the workplace. That is the basis of everything we are doing to try to make sure that disabled people are able to realise their potential, including at work. We engage constructively with the United Nations and we have had constructive meetings, and I will of course meet all the reporting requirements in full.

As hon. Members will know, in line with the convention, disability is mainstreamed across the Government. I reassure everyone that we have strong legislation on our statute book to protect disabled people, through the public sector equality duty in the Equality Act 2010 and through the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Those protections are some of the strongest in the world.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) asked why we have not performed a cumulative impact assessment of our welfare reforms. We undertake cumulative assessments of reforms for each fiscal event, because we want to be as transparent as possible on the cumulative distributional impact of Government policies, including welfare reforms, tax changes—direct and indirect—and public spending changes. To present as full a picture as possible, we publish the living costs and food survey, which includes all the information that Members have mentioned.

All that information enables me to say clearly that the proportion of people in relative poverty in a family in which someone is disabled has not risen since 2010.
These allegations that we are driving people to food banks and forcing them into destitution are simply irresponsible. The proportion of people in absolute poverty in a family in which someone is disabled is at a record low, because we are spending more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is up by £7 billion since 2010; it is around 2.5% of our gross domestic product and accounts for more than 6% of Government spending. As a share of our GDP, public spending on disability and incapacity is the second highest in the G7; only Germany spends more. Disability spending will be higher than 2010 in every year through the spending review. There has been no freeze in the benefits that disabled people receive, and those benefits are not subject to the benefit cap.

It is important that we hear the facts in these debates. Of course there is more we can do and of course I want to close the disability employment gap, but let us actually deal with the facts of the situation and stop this quite irresponsible talk that we have heard in this Chamber and that we hear in the main Chamber. Who will suffer because of what we have heard from Opposition Members today? It will be disabled people and their families, who will be frightened to come forward and claim the benefits and support available to them.

In my few remaining moments, I will touch on some of the criticisms that we have heard about personal independence payments and employment support allowance. PIP and ESA have been subject to a number of independent reviews, with the findings from the most recent, undertaken by Paul Gray, published last year, and to which I have published my response. I responded positively to each and every one of his recommendations.

We are moving forward with continuous improvements to PIP.

The Work and Pensions Committee undertook a full inquiry into the assessment process, and it has welcomed my response and the series of measures we are taking, particularly the video recording of assessments. It is important to me that we build confidence and trust in that assessment process. We know from independent data that the vast majority of people undergoing a work capability assessment or a PIP assessment feel treated with respect and dignity, and that the system works. However, one person receiving poor treatment or not getting the right result is one too many, which is why we are so determined to implement all our reforms.

Those reforms stretch from working more closely with medical professionals, which was raised several times today, to making sure that it is easier for medical professionals to provide data to the process, that companions can support people in those assessments, that home visits are implemented wherever that could support people and that all the forms are in an accessible format. I actively consider implementing each and every suggestion put to me. I have a huge amount of stakeholder involvement with disabled people and people who represent them through our PIP forum and through a whole range of bodies under the Department for Work and Pensions. People are co-designing these benefit systems with us. When PIP was introduced, it was developed with organisations that support disabled people and with disabled people themselves. We want to make sure that PIP remains a modern, dynamic benefit and that the Government treat people with mental health conditions equally seriously as people with physical health conditions.

Many more people are being supported and helped on PIP than they ever were under the disability living allowance legacy benefit. As we know, the evidence shows that more people receive higher rates of support on PIP than on DLA. Some 30% of people moved on to PIP get the highest levels of support; the figure was only 15% on DLA. It is important that disabled people or people with disabled family members who listen to and follow these debates know that there is support for them and that they should come confidently forward to receive it, in the full knowledge that, when we come across problems with the system, we work tirelessly to improve it.

There has been talk about Access to Work. We are very keen to see Access to Work grow and develop. We recently announced that the support available to each person each year is double the average income—that is just under £60,000 per person per year to support an individual into work. It is a demand-led scheme, and I am pleased that it grew by 8% last year. This is one budget that we are happy to see grow, because it means that more people are being supported into work.

I welcome the comments on Disability Confident, which is a growing and successful scheme, and I am grateful to the hon. Members here who have signed up to it. I hope more will come next week to the launch of the community challenge, where we will ask leaders in communities—that is us, as MPs in our local communities—to spend time in our summer recess dedicating ourselves to visiting businesses and employers and asking them to become disability confident and to provide more opportunities for disabled people in their communities. I hope as many people here as possible will come along to that event and will join in with those activities.

So many questions have been asked that I have not been able to answer. I will write back in detail on every point that has been made, so that we can all work together to make sure that every disabled person in our country is truly supported to be the best that they can be and to play as full a part as possible.

10.59 am

**Rosie Duffield:** I thank everybody here for making my first Westminster Hall debate so fantastic. The contributions by Members from across the House were really special. We heard passionate speeches, particularly from my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), which were really moving. That is about it—I know we are out of time—so I thank you for your chairmanship and generosity, Dame Cheryl.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered the Government’s response to the UN report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
Rail Services: Cumbria

11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the future of rail services in Cumbria.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I will try to make my speech a little shorter than it would have been, to allow time for the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who shares my deep concerns on this issue.

The Lakes line, between Oxenholme and Windermere in my constituency, may be only a short, 12-mile stretch of railway, but when it comes to significance, it punches far above its length. The Lake district is in its first full year of being a world heritage site, meaning many thousands more tourists, at least, visiting our part of the world. The Lakes line is essential to those visitors accessing the astounding natural beauty of the national park and surrounding areas and the wonderful tourism industry that provides such a breadth of experiences for locals and visitors alike. Our tourism industry generates £3 billion a year, supports 60,000 jobs and is vital to our local economy, but the Lakes line service is not only used by tourists. It is also a key part of the lives of many locals. It is used by hundreds of commuting schoolchildren and workers and is a means of accessing vital services—or at least, that is how it used to be. Over the past few months, that has all changed.

When 200 of us walked in protest along the length of the Lakes line 10 days ago, what had been a bustling line was deserted. There were no people at the stations and no trains on the tracks. And let us not fall into the trap of believing that the new timetables are entirely to blame for this catastrophe. Services on the Furness line and the Lakes line have been consistently failing and regularly cancelled ever since Northern took over the two lines in April 2016. This April alone saw 160 cancellations just on the Lakes line. By itself, that substandard provision could stretch into the summer holidays.

Let me gently remind the Minister that we are not a dispensable backwater. After London, we are Britain’s second biggest visitor destination. Our contribution to the UK economy is huge and our contribution to the broader British brand is unrivalled. The lack of trains has already had a catastrophic impact on the people of Cumbria, and the toll that it will inevitably take on the local economy could be enormous. Over the past few weeks, local young people taking their A-level and GCSE exams have found themselves stranded or late to school. People have missed hospital appointments and benefits assessments, while others have been regularly late to work. One woman I spoke to is having to move house from Staveley to Kendal just so that her kids can get to and from school every day and she is not blighted by the worry of her 12-year-old child being stranded in town and unable to get home.

Northern has not only failed to do its job, but completely undermined local confidence in this stretch of railway. My constituents are voting with their feet, and the sight of deserted train platforms along the line is now all too familiar. The replacement bus services are barely used by locals at all. Tourists use the service only because they see no alternative.

Northern’s utter failure to do its job and provide adequate train services in Cumbria is not limited to the Lakes line. Over the past few months, the Lakes, Furness and Cumbrian coast lines have all experienced shocking services.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): There are also concerns about staffing levels at Northern. It is short of train crew to cover the new Cumbrian Coast timetable, and the Northern control centres are so overstretched that the routes in Cumbria seem to have fallen right to the bottom of its list of priorities. Over the past month, there have been daily cancellations of trains through Workington, including the last train of the day, which is a huge inconvenience and runs the risk of stranding people miles away from home, with no idea of how to get back. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the situation is simply unsustainable and that Northern is badly letting down thousands of people on a daily basis?

Tim Farron: I completely agree with everything that the hon. Lady has said. It feels to me very much as though all the lines in Cumbria are afterthoughts for Northern, given its huge empire. Many of the staffing

and that he had been “clear to Arriva that doing this over the long term is simply unacceptable”.—[Official Report, 4 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 58.] Those are the Secretary of State’s own words, on the record, from the statement in the House of Commons on 4 June—words that he repeated to me and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness when we met him that evening. It sounds very much to me, and to many of us, as though the Secretary of State said one thing to the House on that Monday and in practice did the opposite on Friday.

This calamity could not have come at a worse time. The cancellations have occurred during the Easter holidays and through the May half-term, and they are now hitting the local economy during the early summer season. There are fears that the substandard or non-existent provision could stretch into the summer holidays.

When 200 of us walked in protest along the length of the Lakes line 10 days ago, what had been a bustling line was deserted. There were no people at the stations and no trains on the tracks. The Northern franchise is huge, covering all the local and commuter services in the north-east, Yorkshire and almost all the north-west of England, yet since the introduction of Northern’s interim timetable on 11 June, one in five of all the cancellations on the entire huge network has been on the relatively small Lakes line. Indeed, it is the only line in the country on which services have been completely suspended. That is beyond unsatisfactory; it is completely unacceptable.

However, Northern has not stopped there. We learned on Friday that Arriva Northern had extended the suspension by a further two weeks, to 2 July. That was possible only because the Government had rubber-stamped its request to extend that appalling suspension. A spokesperson for the Department for Transport said that it did not object to that “operational decision”, despite the fact that the Secretary of State himself had assured me that he was “not prepared to accept more than the current two weeks.”
problems would have been completely foreseeable and predictable by competent management who were planning for the future and had Cumbria’s interests at heart, so the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say what she has said.

As I said, over the past few months the Lakes, Furness and Cumbrian Coast lines have all experienced shocking services. My constituents who use the stations at Arnside, Grange-over-Sands, Kents Bank and Cark have experienced service equally dreadful to that experienced by those who use Oxenholme, Kendal, Burneside, Staveley and Windermere. That is not the result of accidental oversight; it has been caused by a series of appalling decisions by both Northern and the Government.

There seem to be three main failings that must be identified and fixed. First, the Government’s choice to cancel electrification of the Lakes line last year has very clearly contributed to the mess that we are in today. Northern took on the line on the understanding—that is the only excuse I will allow the company—that it would soon be running electric trains, and it planned and ordered on that basis. Because of the Government’s decision to cancel electrification, on the basis of inaccurate figures that must now be revisited, Northern were forced quickly to borrow from Scotland old diesel trains that their drivers were not trained to run.

Secondly, the Government awarded the Lakes line and Furness line franchises to Arriva Northern from April 2016. This was an unfolding disaster from day one, given the removal of good services from TransPennine and the introduction of a substandard service from Northern. The Minister should undo that mistake today and take the Furness and Lakes lines off Northern. It has clearly breached the terms of its contract: it is contracted to run trains and it has failed to do so.

Thirdly, we have seen incompetence from Northern and inertia from the Government. The fact that no statement was made to Parliament on the crisis until 4 June, despite months of poor performance and despite many of us raising the matter in the weeks and months beforehand—I raised it at Prime Minister’s questions and at Transport questions weeks before it came to the House of the Government’s own volition—leaves many of us questioning the Government’s commitment to those of us in the far north-west.

When the Secretary of State did finally make a statement to the House, it was in part to explain that he had permitted Northern not only to cancel trains, but to cancel an entire line for what turned out to be a month. That cancellation is as unprecedented as it is unacceptable.

In the last few days, a number of us have chosen to prove that we could and would do what the Government and Northern rail could or would not. On Sunday, thanks to the Lakes line rail user group, West Coast Railways and many other volunteers, we began a temporary and limited, but reliable and glorious, service on the Lakes line. The Lakelander has been successfully running on that line for the last four days, and it has kept to time.

Many in Government and the rail industry have helped us—they know who they are, and they probably would not thank me if I named them—but many have not been so helpful. As we have gone through the process of reintroducing trains to England’s most picturesque railway line, we have seen from the inside the lack of co-ordination and can-do spirit in some parts of Government and the rail industry. Never have I seen so much buck-passing or excuse-making as I have in the last few days. Despite that, we now have a limited but excellent service on the Lakes line—a heritage operator on a commuter route.

I do not need to tell hon. Members that that is not a long-term solution, so I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm what action he plans to take. Will he remove the Lakes and Furness lines from Northern as a matter of urgency and run those services directly from the Department until a suitable operator can be identified with the necessary resources, competence and commitment that those two superb lines deserve? The Secretary of State told me and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness that he would look at that option two weeks ago, so what progress have the Government made?

Will the Minister look again at the case for the electrification of the Lakes line? We now know that the Secretary of State cancelled the electrification last year based on figures that were ludicrously inaccurate. The model that he threw out was based on a service with trains running on at least two tracks, at 125 mph and at intervals of less than two minutes. I respectfully remind the Minister that a brief look at the Lakes line demonstrates that we require none of those things. As a result of using that inaccurate model, it was assumed that the electrification would cost more than double what it would cost to electrify the line in reality. Given the enormous damage done to the reputation of the Lakes line by Northern and the Government, does the Minister agree that the best way to show ongoing commitment to it would be to keep the Government’s initial promise to electrify the line?

Will the Minister fulfil the promise made to me by the Secretary of State in yesterday’s debate to ensure funding to support a marketing campaign to repair and boost the reputation of the Lakes line and of the wider Cumbrian economy? I have forwarded a formal bid for that package to him. I am grateful to Cumbria Tourism, which I asked to draft that proposal and which came up with an excellent bid. I understand that the Minister spoke to the chief executive of Cumbria Tourism this morning, and I am grateful to him for that, so I hope that he will be able to announce today that he will endorse that bid.

Given the chaos on our railways, will the Minister clarify his and the Secretary of State’s powers? On the east coast main line, it appears that the Government have the power to remove a franchise from an operator because the shareholders deem it unprofitable. However, Northern, which has demonstrated an inability to run a basic train service, still retains its franchise. Why has the Secretary of State not intervened? Is it because he does not have the power? In that case, will the Government seek such powers from Parliament? If, for one, would be happy to vote to grant them. Or is it that he has those powers but has chosen not to use them, in which case he has quite some explaining to do to the people of Cumbria?

It appears that the Government are prepared to take a line away from a rail company when shareholders are losing money, but when passengers are left stranded and are forced to miss work and school, they simply look the other way. That raises the question: what is the
purpose of the railways? Are they a public service that underpins our economy, or simply an opportunity for private profit at public expense?

In arranging the Lakes line temporary shuttle service over the last few days, it has become clear that when there is a commitment to a railway line, a passion to serve local people and a determination to succeed, anything is possible. The question is: is the Northern franchise not simply too big and too unwieldy for its own good? Would it not be better for the Cumbrian lines to be taken out of the franchise altogether and run as a micro-franchise so that the people who run our lines are also the people who are committed to them?

I was walking with my children along the old railway line at Sandside between Milnthorpe and Arnside last week. We talked about what had happened to that old line—why it had been closed, the tracks removed and the viaduct dismantled. The Beeching axe fell more than half a century ago on lines that the industry had given up on. It is painfully clear to all of us that Northern has given up on Cumbria. For the sake of everyone who relies on the Lakes and Furness lines, from local students and commuters to our millions of visitors, I call on the Minister to give Northern its marching orders. The travellers of Cumbria are at the end of their tether and, frankly, so am I.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): With permission of the hon. Member who moved the motion, I call John Woodcock for a brief contribution.

11.15 am

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate you, Dame Cheryl, on your elevation. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for his generosity in allowing me a couple of minutes to speak. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on the key role he clearly played in getting a rail service running on the Lakes line.

I will add a couple of remarks about the Furness line and the Cumbria coast line, which are integral parts of the package. I agree with all the calls the hon. Gentleman made. Surely, there is a case that Northern has broken the terms of its contract across its network, particularly on the Lakes line. There is a commitment to a railway line, a passion to there is a commitment to a railway line, a passion to.

The Minister must be aware that the Cumbria coast line’s passenger numbers have shown a frightening drop-off since Northern came in. At a time when we are building a world-class civil nuclear corridor, that is clearly not in the country’s interest. On the Furness line, there has been a 500% increase in cancellations since Northern took over the franchise. The recent upsurge in trains running has been made possible, as the company admits, only because the Lakes line has not been running so drivers have been available. In rectifying the problems on the Lakes line, I make a plea to the Minister not to rob Peter to pay Paul. The Furness line and the Cumbria coast line are absolutely vital.

Surely, it is time to admit that the move by the Government and the company to impose driver-only operated trains and to ban vital and popular guards from trains was wrong. The Government can make things better for passengers who are suffering yet more strike action because of that wrong-headed move.

11.17 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this debate, which gives us the chance to discuss the Lakes line and Northern in some detail. That is important at this time of significant disruption to passenger services, which affects his constituents and those of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who also made some powerful points. Let me not forget the points made by the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) on behalf of her constituents.

I want to remind all hon. Members that the Department’s overriding priority is to restore the reliability of the service across the network. The Secretary of State has left franchise owners, including Northern, under no illusion that they must urgently improve their operational performance. We are also seeking to ensure that we learn all the lessons of why we are in this position and of what has happened since the introduction of the timetable on 20 May, so we have commissioned an independent report by Stephen Glaister, the chair of the Office of Rail and Road.

On Northern’s performance, passengers have experienced unacceptable disruption to their journeys on parts of the network, particularly on the Lakes line. There is a very long way to go until performance reaches what anyone would regard as a reasonable level, but, as I said yesterday, there are signs of improvement. We are starting to turn a corner. The introduction of a temporary timetable by Northern on 4 June will start to rebuild passengers’ trust. The first signs are promising. Indicative figures show that over the first two weeks of the reduced timetable, 80% of trains arrived on time and 4% of trains were cancelled or arrived significantly late. That compares to the previous two-week period when 66% of trains arrived on time and an average of 12% of trains were cancelled or significantly late. That is clearly not yet good enough by any stretch; I am not by any means suggesting that. What is important is that we build on that improvement and ensure that over the coming weeks Northern makes further progress towards restoring journeys and reducing disruption as rapidly as possible. Northern plans to run that timetable until the end of July, when it will review progress and hopes to significantly increase the number of timetabled services while continuing to ensure increasing stability.

On the Lakes line, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has said, Northern took the decision to implement an interim timetable from the morning of 4 June and, within that timetable, to effect a temporary suspension of all its services on the Lakes line. That was an operational decision taken by Northern and accepted by Transport for the North, which co-manages the franchise along with the Department for Transport, as the best temporary solution for passengers. That gave the operator greater flexibility to allocate work and training, and it concentrates resources on providing a more resilient train service on wider parts of the network, while providing Lakes line passengers with a more reliable service.

Tim Farron: The Minister says that Transport for the North and the Department for Transport share the franchise. Can he clarify that the Department was asked for and granted permission to extend the suspension of services on the Lakes line?
Joseph Johnson: Yes, I can confirm that the franchise is co-managed by Transport for the North, which represents the 19 local transport authorities and local businesses, and the Department for Transport, through the Rail North Partnership. The Rail North Partnership accepted Northern’s operational decision, and the Department for Transport did not accept the decision that went to the Transport for the North board and to the Department for Transport for approval.

The Transport Secretary has been very clear that the line must be open as soon as possible, and Northern is working to keep customers on the move, especially with the tourist season soon reaching its busiest time. From 11 June, the bus service was increased to a pattern of three buses an hour, compared with the usual hourly train service. As well as Northern, both Transport for the North and Transport Focus have been working to obtain feedback from passengers about the replacement bus service. I understand that there has been recognition that the bus service is regarded as acceptable.

I am aware that an open-access operator, West Coast Railways, has agreed access with Network Rail and holds a valid safety certificate with the Office of Rail and Road, permitting it to run services. I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale on his efforts in galvanising services along the route. In the meantime, the Rail North Partnership and the Department have focused on the introduction of full scheduled Northern services. I am pleased to note the announcement yesterday of a shuttle service between Oxenholme and Windermere offering 12 services daily to commence from 2 July. Northern has consulted Cumbria County Council, the Rail North Partnership and Transport for the North on the details of that shuttle service, which will be an important next step for the resumption of high-quality services in the Lakes area.

On why problems happened and what is being done about them, as hon. Members know, Northern has faced a shortage in the availability of drivers with appropriate route and traction knowledge in various locations, which has, unfortunately, led to far more delays and cancellations to train services. As a result of the delay to electrification schemes in the north-west, Northern is currently undertaking a significant training plan for drivers. That training is planned to continue until the end of July. Northern has also worked hard with ASLEF regarding the situation around rest day working and is hopeful of finding a longer-term resolution that will improve performance. Once the problems are resolved, we will have a much better service for passengers. I understand that that is small comfort to them when things are not working as they should, but once we are through this difficult period, we will have a better railway at the end of it, particularly once all the new trains start to arrive later this year.

On compensation, we are clear that passengers on the lines that have been severely affected will receive additional compensation. My Department is working closely with Network Rail, train operators and stakeholders to introduce a special compensation scheme as soon as possible. We have already recommended to the board of Transport for the North that passengers who buy weekly, monthly or annual tickets on Northern and TPE-affected routes should be eligible to claim up to four weeks’ compensation. We are inviting Transport for the North to work with the operators on the detail of the scheme, which will be announced by the operators in due course so that passengers make compensation claims from early July. I hope that Transport for the North’s board will be able to confirm the final details of the compensation scheme by the time of its next board meeting on 28 June, so that payments can begin to flow in July.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked about support for the northern economy. We are looking at options to support the Northern economy further, and we expect Northern to fund a marketing campaign encouraging travel to affected areas by train, including the Lakes line when it resumes operation by Northern.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness asked structural questions about the shape of the franchise and its future. I understand that passengers have been frustrated by the changes that have happened since services were transferred from TPE to Northern a couple of years ago. The rolling stock is not as good, and reliability has suffered in a way that is not acceptable. There was also understandable disappointment that the Lakes line will not be electrified as previously planned.

Tim Farron: To press the Minister on that point, I spoke to Mark Carne a couple of weeks ago and he said he would look again at electrification of the Lakes line. Admittedly, that was before I criticised his award of a CBE, but I hope that he does not take that personally. I would be grateful if the Minister paid serious attention to the possibility of reopening that case, given the evidence I put forward in my speech.

Joseph Johnson: We are looking very carefully at how we can deliver the passenger benefits that electrification would have delivered along the Lakes line. We are continually assessing projects to ensure they offer the best approach. Technology, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is advancing very quickly, and the Government are committed to using the most suitable, practical and affordable approach to modernising each part of the network. Bi-mode trains and other technologies mean that we do not need to electrify every bit of every line to achieve significant improvements, and we will electrify lines only where it delivers a genuine benefit to passengers.

Northern will begin work to explore the possibility of deploying alternative-fuel trains on the route by 2021. It will be a trial to pilot trains capable of using the electrified mainline to Manchester airport and then switching to battery power sources on the Lakes line. Until that happens, the Secretary of State has committed to new trains operating on that line from 2019, subject to the business case.

All stations on the Northern network will benefit from a £38 million investment in bringing stations up to standard, delivering new platform seating, replacement shelters, new waiting rooms and toilets and customer information screens. That will be delivered by the station improvement fund and will also include ticket machines, real-time information and help points at every station with at least 10 passengers using it every day. There will be an additional £9 million investment in making stations more inclusive and accessible.

The Department, working through the Rail North Partnership, is putting in place an action plan for Northern, which includes improving driver rostering to get more trains running now, increasing driver training on new...
routes, additional contingency drivers and management presence at key locations in Manchester and putting extra peak services in the timetable along the Bolton corridor. Northern has also announced that, until the end of July, it will run fewer services than were originally planned, per the May timetable, to give passengers greater certainty and to increase opportunities for driver training. That temporary measure is necessary to stabilise the service, enabling improvements to be introduced.

I hope that I have reassured hon. Members of the seriousness with which the Government are taking the disruption facing passengers. We are taking action to resolve the problems as quickly as possible, to compensate passengers and to learn the lessons that will help prevent such problems happening in future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

_Sitting suspended._
to argue otherwise is to ignore centuries of history and our present-day realities. So, understanding how these different Parliaments and levels of Government relate to one another, given their different competencies, is vital to this Parliament.

What, then, is the current situation with intergovernmentalism in the United Kingdom? The process is governed by a 1999 memorandum of understanding that set out the intentions for how joint working and co-operation should work. There is also a series of concordats that set out the structure for how devolved Administrations should work with the UK Government to ensure that there is co-ordination on certain issues.

The memorandum of understanding then outlines how the Joint Ministerial Committee should work. The JMC is the main way in which such joint working can happen. There are three main elements: to consider where there are devolved issues that will be affected by non-devolved decision making; to consider where there should be joint working on devolved issues; and the resolution of disputes.

The JMC is high-level, chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by the leaders of all the devolved Governments and the Secretaries of State for each of the territorial offices. In the formative years of devolution—from 1999 to 2004—the JMC hardly, if ever, met. The 1999 memorandum of understanding comes from a time when Labour was in power in Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff. That meant that issues could mostly be dealt with through the internal structures and workings of the Labour party.

As with so many things, the way that Labour approached this situation was without any thought for a future that did not involve them in government. Labour assumed it would be in the respective seats of government in Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff in perpetuity, and the whole machinery of government was run out of No. 10 or No. 11 Downing Street. Scottish Labour, in the words of a former Labour leader, was run as a branch office of the Blair-Brown axis. In part, that was why Tony Blair once described the power of the Scottish Parliament as being akin to that of an English parish council.

That arrogance in power is what led the people of Scotland to reject Scottish Labour. I remember the days when Conservative voters in Scotland would choose positively to vote for the Scottish National party to get Labour out, and certainly not because of nationalist sympathies. It hardly seems necessary for me to say this, but it is changed days now. The decade since 2007, which followed the end of Labour rule in Scotland and the election of an SNP Scottish Executive, has repeatedly served to show up how inadequate and incomplete the constitutional machinery is. These years have been characterised by growing party political mistrust and division.

Nationalism feeds on discord; it feeds on any grievance that can be created. We saw that last week, when the SNP Members stormed out of the main Chamber of the House of Commons. Theatrics aside, that told the story of how nationalism works. Nationalism works by cynically manipulating imagined slights; it works by stoking our fears and worst instincts. And when there are gaps in the constitutional machinery that should bring Governments and Parliaments together, as I contend there are, those gaps become a wide open space for the manufacture of grievance and division.

Nationalism does not instinctively seek to work co-operatively. I am surprised that even now well-meaning and sincere colleagues from across the House misunderstand the politics of Scottish nationalism. Those colleagues believe that if we are all courteous and reasonable, and show a willingness to compromise to reach an agreement, that approach will be reciprocated.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Although what he says about nationalism is true, does he agree that at the other end of this equation his party is currently also using this situation to aid its best interests? What we are seeing here is a fight between two of Scotland's Governments, which serve two political parties and not the people of Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The fractious relationship between the Governments of Scotland serves nobody's purposes, and it serves no good purpose to have the situation continue.

To be clear, when nationalists walk into a negotiation they are not looking for a way to build a consensus that works for everyone; they would far rather walk out in a huff, having achieved nothing, because that fits with their agenda of conflict and grievance. For them, it is always about the politics and never the outcomes. They would rather have the argument than the solution.

There is no doubt that the nationalists create jurisdictional confusion for their political advantage. If we consider how the public sector in Scotland is run through the civil service and, perhaps more importantly, local health boards and local government, we see that differences between English and Scottish regulatory systems allow a wall to be built around the Scottish public sector. However, when we scratch the surface, we see that the differences between the system in Scotland and the systems in the rest of the United Kingdom are actually not so great. This separation creates separatism; it is moving us apart; and it builds a wall around Scotland.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech; he is speaking very passionately and articulating clearly the challenges that we face in Scotland now, given the new and evolving democratic position that we find ourselves in. However, in my own area in the borders, we have the borderlands growth deal, which is a very good example of having communities on either side of the border facing the same challenges. The Governments are coming together; the councils are coming together; and we will hopefully find solutions and investment. It is very disappointing, therefore, that the Scottish Government have indicated that they might withdraw from the JMC and stop the delivery of these growth deals, which would mean that those communities would lose out on that investment.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for the information he brings to the debate. What he describes would be a tragic outcome for everyone, but he underlines the point I am trying to make, which
is that the emphasis on differences is not always true. The wall I am describing cements a nationalist agenda of Scottish exceptionalism and difference. It discourages working across borders. The border is used as a barrier to seek to limit the building of partnerships throughout the United Kingdom.

Glasgow City Council has more in common with Manchester and Birmingham City Councils than it does with Argyll and Bute, but they are lumped together incongruously to satisfy a geographic and nationalist imperative. Similarly, the problems of rural health boards are not dissimilar, regardless of whether they are on one side of the border or the other. It is a real shame that the arrangements for the devolved settlements do not contain references to partnership working, other than at ministerial level. Instead, we have created a system that allows for the creation of division and separation, rather than one that encourages partnership and innovation.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman makes some interesting propositions on collaborative working at a number of different levels, but the current primary mechanism is the Joint Ministerial Committee. Does he agree that it is currently pointless, as it has no authority? It needs to be put on a statutory footing to give it proper teeth. I am perturbed, because the hon. Gentleman voted down a proposed amendment that would have done that. Why did he do that?

Stephen Kerr: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. I welcome his intervention. I will come on to the point he raised. It has also become the norm with the current arrangements that Scotland’s two Governments conduct their business by megaphone rather than by meeting, speaking and perhaps even listening. There is no imperative that means they must sit down and listen to each other, which speaks to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and that is just not right. Regionalism is a positive example of how things could be made to work.

The recently established metropolitan Mayors by necessity work with different levels of government. They work with the councils across their regions and with the UK Government. That in turn builds a broad-based coalition of partners that seems to work well, criss-crossing local rivalries and party political loyalties for the good of the region. It encourages compromise and the sharing of objectives. Andy Burnham, the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, must work with Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors, and he also must work closely with Conservative Government Ministers. He must negotiate and compromise, as all the Mayors do, but of course none of them are nationalists.

The arrangements for the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies do not encompass that vision of partnering. They seem to me to be tokenistic and designed to create a hierarchy of importance that is not in keeping with a vision of partnership unionism. The history of the JMC is that it meets irregularly on an ad hoc basis, with little or no formal recognition of the value of joint working. There is limited transparency on what happens at those meetings and what difference they make. They are exclusively focused on the Government-to-Government business of the moment. There is no structure for formal departmental or inter-parliamentary working, or for local government agencies or other national agencies to work together. There is so much to be gained by creating those networks and forums as part of the process of the machinery of the Union.

There are examples in the world of how things can be made to work better. The Canadian system is a case in point. It is federal in nature, but the different provinces and territories have different levels of local control, and the parliamentary system has important similarities with that of the UK. The Canadians have a national Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth, headed by a Cabinet Minister—the so-called Unity Minister. So important is that role to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that he performs it himself. It is not as simple as being a command and control network from the federal Government. Far from it—the Ministry’s remit is far deeper than establishing national guidance or control for the provincial and territorial governments. It is responsible for encouraging joint working between the provinces and territories and the local government agencies.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend has spoken precisely about the Canadian situation. He is coming from a Scottish point of view, but does he see the parallel with our position in Europe? There is an intergovernmental body in existence already, called the Council of Europe. We should be using it more as the framework for the future.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the Council of Europe, and I am going to talk about Europe. I will return to Canada for a moment, though, because there is a plethora of joint working agencies across Canada engaged in educational, infrastructural, economic, health and environmental works. The support mechanism is a secretariat that seems to be independent of the federal Executive. The body is drawn from civil servants from across the Canadian public sector and exists to support intergovernmental co-operation at all levels. It encourages and facilitates meetings, helping provincial, territorial, federal and local government leaders to arrange sessions and meetings on any subject. They call it collaborative federalism, and it encourages a sense of national unity, even in a federation where there are nationalist elements. There are lessons for the United Kingdom here.

I propose a partnership Unionism. At present, we have the Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Offices. It has often been thought that merging them would create efficiencies for the UK Government, but in doing so we would lose a lot of the point of those Departments. The idea is that they give voice to the nations of the Union within the UK Government and are the UK Government’s voice in the nations that they serve. Rather than thinking about merging them and reducing the role of the respective Secretaries of State, it would be far better to think of an entirely better way of working.

There is a statement in the memorandum of understanding of 1999 that says that “the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are responsible for ensuring that the interests of those parts of the UK in non-devolved matters are properly represented and considered.” Part of the issue here, however, is the role of the territorial Offices of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Departments that have a Union responsibility, such as the Treasury, the Department for Business,
Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for International Trade and so forth, depend too much on the territorial Offices. They should not be channelling their activities through a territorial Department; they should be actively involved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on a direct basis and to a greater extent. I feel very strongly about that.

The Departments that have an area of responsibility covering the whole of the Union should be active in all the nations and regions of the Union, not only in England. Please do not short-change my constituents. We pay our taxes, elect a Government and have every right to expect that the Union Departments are working for us across the United Kingdom.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What the hon. Gentleman seems to be proposing would fundamentally undermine the principle of devolution.

Stephen Kerr: Absolutely not. On the contrary, what I am proposing will be another support to the functioning of devolution, because it will bring the nations and regions of the United Kingdom together, so that we can have better governance in all parts of the United Kingdom. As I said earlier, I feel very strongly about the issue.

The Union Departments that work in Scotland should not be working through the prism of the Scotland Office. In the eyes of the Scottish people, there needs to be more to the UK Government presence in Scotland than the Scotland Office. It is not an easy task by any means to operate a territorial Office: the expertise required stretches across all aspects of government, and the territorial offices have relatively small budgets to staff themselves. The expectation that they can have expertise across all aspects of government is unrealistic.

We must also banish any notion of “devolve and forget” on the part of the Departments that serve the whole Union. Can we please ensure that there is no tendency on the part of those Ministers who have a direct responsibility for matters in Scotland to walk on eggshells and tiptoe around issues, rather than authoritatively dealing with them, as they would in any other part of the UK? The people of Scotland want the UK Government to act, and they have every right to expect them to do so. Surely, Ministers of the Crown are not nervous about upsetting nationalists? I can report that I have seen no evidence of such an attitude from the Ministers I have worked with.

Part of the confusion here is a genuine misunderstanding of which Departments are genuinely UK-wide and which Departments are England-only. A renaming of Departments that relate to England to clearly mark them as Departments for England, such as having the “Department of Health and Social Care for England” and the “Department for Education for England”, would help with the demarcation. It may require some rejigging of departmental responsibilities. I find it very difficult to understand how a Department can possibly have both England-only and Union responsibilities. The Home Office, for example, should be the UK Department for Borders and Security; prisons and policing in England should be passed to the Justice Department for England.

Deidre Brock: Is the hon. Gentleman proposing an English Parliament? Many people would support him in that objective.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am proposing nothing for England. It is up to the people of England to decide what kind of governance they want. I am proposing a better way to operate the Union to serve all parts of the United Kingdom.

My proposal would help the Health and Social Care Secretaries for Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland to sit together in a council of equals and discuss matters of mutual concern, allowing joint working and the cross-fertilisation of ideas. It would be the same for education, policing, transport and a multitude of other issues. The creation of a new and powerful Department of the Union at Cabinet level would help to bind that together and encourage joint working. That is especially important because leaving the European Union will require us to come up with new frameworks that will need to be negotiated between the devolved Governments. Those frameworks would allow for mutual esteem and respect.

Intergovernmental conferences should be a big deal, not an ad hoc tick-box exercise to satisfy a memorandum of understanding. Those in political leadership should be required to hold such meetings regularly and to have a Department that drives a partnership agenda. The Department of the Union should be established with civil servants seconded from across the United Kingdom, not simply from Whitehall, to encourage a culture of mutual respect and the dissemination of ideas throughout the country. Its remit should reach beyond the national Government level to the local level—not in a statutory or interfering way, but in a positive way that encourages Governments and politicians to work together.

The Department would have at its core the principle of early intervention in conflict resolution. It would be designed to ensure that conflict is avoided and consensus achieved before there is any hint of a full-blown confrontation.

Deidre Brock: I am really interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Given the behaviour of the UK Government towards Scotland over the past few weeks, and last week in particular, it seems to me that they are not particularly interested in what Scotland or Scots have to say.

Stephen Kerr: With the greatest respect, I have never heard such nonsense. The opposite is the case. The United Kingdom Government are determined to ensure that powers repatriated from Brussels go to the Scottish Parliament, and the SNP voted against that last week. We should never forget that.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will give way one more time, and then I should finish.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity. He mentioned local government, which is an important aspect of the equation. This is not merely about devolved powers residing in Holyrood; it is a question of the over-centralisation of government in Scotland itself. Scotland is actually the most centralised country in Europe in terms of governance. We have to radically address that distribution of power within Scotland.
Stephen Kerr: I could not agree more. We need to look closely at what has resulted from 11 years of SNP Government in Edinburgh. It is highly centralised and it is denuding our democracy at a local, grass-roots level.

When there is a dispute or an argument, there must be a formal process for arbitration and ultimately for judgment. It is still right and proper that the ultimate judgment in matters of constitutional law should be reserved to the Supreme Court, but such a referral should be seen as failure of the model that I am outlining. We should take the best lessons from the Canadian system and from our experience in the European Union. We should build on the strengths of the EU Commission model to ensure that all parts of the Union are engaged. That may require politicians to think beyond their existing positions and more strategically than they do today.

The EU has also created a series of structures designed to draw the union closer together. The Committee of the Regions was a good example of that, where local government was involved in the decision-making structure. That gave an incentive for local government to get involved and work together across the EU. It helped to draw people together and to forge friendships and working partnerships. We need the same for the UK, and a statutory meeting of local government across the UK would be a good foundation to build that on, supported by a secretariat from the Department of the Union.

My vision is for a system that is underpinned by statute, where an independent body provides a secretariat for intergovernmental working, replicating that which occurs in the Canadian and European systems. It would be founded in a spirit of co-operation, and laws would need to be passed to ensure that it was funded and given the authority to co-ordinate that kind of joint working. We would need to give it the kudos to attract and retain talent, and it would need to be at the heart of the Governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and London.

The ideas that I am presenting are fairly simple ones that would allow the Union to flourish. Learning from the Canadian and EU experience would allow a new partnership and allow Unionism to emerge by stark contrast to divisive nationalism. I love the Union, and it remains under threat by nationalism. Those of us who believe in it have an immovable duty to work together to resolve our differences and problems, to work better to come forward and give their ideas for a realignment of our constitutional machinery. We must work together to resolve our differences and problems, rather than shout at each other over the media or the Floor of the House. I know the public in Stirling and the rest of the United Kingdom would like us to do that. They are fed up of the point scoring and petty politics. They want politicians to be mature, to act maturely and to work together to build a better United Kingdom for the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. Six Members are standing. If hon. Members stick to five minutes for their speeches to allow everybody in, I will not have to impose an official time limit.

2.56 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate and under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Wilson. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for the tone and the manner in which he presented the debate. We have seen over the last week or so in this Parliament what can be achieved if people work together constructively, rather than perform petty political stunts that merely fan the flames of what we are trying to fight against.

The hon. Gentleman talked about a fractious relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments, which there certainly is. I made the point in the House this week that we have to try to find a way for both parties to come together, because the current stand-off, particularly on some of the major issues regarding devolution and our withdrawal from the European Union, cannot be sustained in the long term. We have to find a way for both Governments to put aside their problems, to get around the table and to try to thrash out a negotiation. A negotiation has to involve compromise. There have been very few negotiations in history on major issues where both parties have got 100% of what they wanted. There needs to be a willingness for both sides to compromise, and I am not sure at this stage if that ability to compromise is there.

We know the structure of both Governments working together is written down in a 1999 memorandum of understanding. In fact, Tony Blair, whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and Jack McConnell the former First Minister said at the time that they wished to remove it, because they did not think that the Joint Ministerial Committee, in the way it had been set up, was constructive and would take things forward. We now have some real problems with devolution. It worked when Scotland was Scottish Labour, Wales was Welsh Labour and there was a UK Labour Government. Government was able to function, probably because of the more informal ways that the Governments could talk, rather than through the formal JMC.

I took umbrage at a bit of what the hon. Gentleman said. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) was right. I tabled an amendment to the Scotland Bill that would have put the Joint Ministerial Committee on a statutory footing and set out agendas, minutes, publication, involvement and a mechanism for resolving disputes. The Conservative Government at the time completely dismissed that and voted against the amendment.

During the debate on the Sewel convention, I tabled an amendment that would have taken the word “normally” out of the convention, so the UK Government could not legislate in devolved areas unless they went through the process of the JMC and a formal dispute resolution mechanism. The Opposition have been trying to be helpful this week—indeed, we have been trying to be helpful for a number of years—regarding legislation on the Floor of the House. The hon. Member for Stirling was not in the House at the time, but his party voted against our amendments.
We have to get off this grievance agenda. I have no problem with the SNP’s stunt of walking out of the Chamber. It elevated an issue to the front pages from pages seven or eight, because we were unable to get media interest in those big issues. I have no problem with that kind of stunt, but does it really serve the interests of the people whom we are here to represent? We have to find a way forward.

The key point is that there is absolutely no trust whatsoever between the Scottish Government and the UK Government at the moment. Until we can find a way of building that trust, the only people who will suffer are the people of Scotland, who voted in 2014 to remain part of the United Kingdom, who voted for the Scottish parliamentary set-up that we have at the moment and who voted for their contribution to the UK Government in terms of the votes in Scotland. The people have spoken and would expect both Governments to get on with it, and will be very frustrated at the moment. I agree with the tone and tenure of what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve. I hope that the Minister will listen to some of those very brave ideas and bring some forward.

I will finish with an example. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Canada, but in the provisions of the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, he will find it written down how the north of Ireland and the Republic work together cross-border on a whole manner of issues—how that holds together is one of the biggest concerns in the post-Brexit Britain environment. There are examples out there in Canada and across the globe of how Governments can find formal mechanisms to work together, but there is also one on our border across the Irish sea. If the hon. Gentleman was to bring a ten-minute rule Bill to the House, proposing something written in a legislative form, it would certainly get my backing. I am sure that it would get the backing of the whole House if we could find a mechanism for both Governments to work better together in a more formal setting.

I would say this to the hon. Gentleman: knock on the door of the Secretary of State at Dover House and get him to publish the proper minutes of the Joint Ministerial Committee on the issues of devolution, so that we can find out whether it is the Conservative party or the Scottish National party that is frustrating it. I think that I know the answer to that question already, but the Scottish public deserve to see exactly what is going on. That is why we have devolution. The SNP are frustrating it. I think that I know the answer to that question already, but the Scottish public deserve to see exactly what is going on. That is why we have devolution. The SNP are frustrating it. I think that I know the answer to that question already, but the Scottish public deserve to see exactly what is going on.

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3.1 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your direction, Mr Wilson. I congratulate my colleague and constituency neighbour, the hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), on securing this important debate. I will start on a positive note—the recent signing of the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city deal, which is a prime example of what can be achieved when different levels of government work together to achieve for their constituencies.

The key point about devolution in this country is that reserved powers are as important to the devolution settlement as devolved powers. Schedule 5(1) of the Scotland Act 2016 is very specific. Westminster is as vital to devolution as Holyrood. That is why we have directly elected Scottish MPs. If anyone ever doubts the influence of Scotland in Westminster, they should look at the Conservative Government, which would not be standing if it were not for the seats held by Scottish Conservatives—within the Conservative party itself.

Devolution has so far been a completely one-way street. With the Bill that is currently in the House, we will have 80 more powers transferred to the Scottish Parliament that have never before sat with Scotland. My hon. Friend raised some important questions about the structure of how we want to govern for our constituencies and for the United Kingdom. Devolution was not meant to build a wall between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It was not meant to separate Scotland off. It was meant to bring power closer to the communities that that power is meant to serve.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that devolution should not be looked at as a wall. Does he agree that we are talking about not just how the United Kingdom operates within a governmental mechanism and how we can devolve governance and politics, but how we can also devolve the economy and employment? An awful lot of the time nationalism feeds on dissatisfaction and unemployment, and that is why we need to try to address the problems that exist right across the United Kingdom.

Luke Graham: I could not agree more. I think devolution has been a response to the failures of previous Governments of all colours to serve all nations and regions of the United Kingdom. I will come on shortly to the point that has been raised, and I have raised previously, about the centralisation of power in Edinburgh and how that does a disservice to my constituents and others throughout Scotland.

Looking at the performance of devolved powers, there are very few benchmarks where we can say we are doing better. In health, seven out of the eight targets set by the devolved Administration have not been met. NHS Tayside, which covers a large part of my constituency, is a full percentage point below that of the rest of the United Kingdom. We need to look at what central Government can do to provide even more support, whether through additional funding or whatever else, to support our constituents.

No one should be forced to choose between being Scottish and British, or English and British, or Northern Irish and British, or Welsh and British. It is an identity that people can choose to adopt. It should not matter wherever someone is born—Scotland and the United Kingdom can be their home. We need to be very clear that devolution should not act as a wall but should be used to pass power right the way through the United Kingdom.
On the centralisation of power in Edinburgh, the Smith commission cross-party agreement, which included the Scottish National party, said that powers would pass from Westminster to Edinburgh to local councils and authorities. That has not happened. Powers have been taken from Westminster and are gathered jealously in Edinburgh, rather than being distributed to support our local councils and constituents.

It was not Scotland alone that won the world wars. It was not England in isolation that launched the NHS. We achieved those big programmes together. Looking forward, we can bring together and champion our 75,000 or 100,000 constituents, the 5.3 million Scots in Scotland and the 800,000 or so in England, and pull together as a total country of more than 65 million to face some of the huge challenges that the entire world faces. We are not better facing climate change alone or becoming smaller. We are not better facing international instability on our own or becoming smaller. We are better doing that together. Governments should support that. Devolution is not a wall. Westminster and every other level of government needs to deliver for our constituents.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on setting the scene so very passionately. It is refreshing to have him and his colleagues in the House to add to our richness of political expression on all sides of the Chamber. It is good to have that. I am an Ulster Scot, with my ancestry in Scotland—I have checked it out and know that to be the case. I am descended from the Stewarts from the lowlands of Scotland. The name Shannon is not an Irish name; it is a derivative of the name Stewart, and I am very pleased to put that on the record.

I understand completely the point of view of the hon. Member for Stirling, and I am sure he will understand my comments within the framework of the current Northern Ireland situation. I am a Unionist, a Democratic Unionist and an Ulster Scot, and we are within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we are better together, all regions and all of us—Scots, Welsh, Northern Irish and English.

As hon. Members have outlined, the framework for intergovernmental co-operation in its current form came from devolution in 1998. The UK Government have territorial Offices whose function it is to facilitate relations with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive. The Cabinet Office is also responsible for intergovernmental discussions where matters arise between them. The parent forum for intergovernmental co-operation is the Joint Ministerial Committee, which consists of the respective Heads of Government in the United Kingdom and, where relevant, the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but other Ministers may attend in certain circumstances where the relevant areas of policy discussion require it.

As much as I respect and understand my friends and colleagues in this Chamber of all political aspirations and from other regions, the situation that we face in Northern Ireland is so very different, and is so very complex and serious, that I would not be doing my job as the MP for Strangford if I did not stand up and say that we are in a crisis. It is past time that the Cabinet, the Joint Ministerial Council and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland began to take steps to take control of the non-administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Northern Ireland.

We are fast approaching the time when that will have to happen. We have school principals from every area of the country—in my constituency and across the whole of Northern Ireland—writing to us as MPs, literally begging someone to come and sort out the funding issue. We had additional money granted in the block grant, and additional money delivered to address issues in health and education, but for some reason we have permanent secretaries who feel unable to allocate additional funds as needed. We achieved the £1.4 billion financial agreement between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party that delivers for everyone of all political aspirations in Northern Ireland, on both sides of the community—that money is for all. The greater good of the nation drove the deal that we made in June last year.

We are looking at country schools that service isolated communities and the cutting of their funding by a full teacher’s salary, which to all intents and purposes closes the doors, while at the same time giving grants for schools that manage to save resources for the following years. Let us allow them to fund a teacher instead of giving grants for not using as much in resources. In my constituency we have teachers from small rural schools bag-packing in Tesco on Saturdays to attempt to raise money for their schools when they should have time off, as is their right. We need a Minister to direct a diversion of funding to staunch the bleeding of our education system and to carry out the surgery that is needed to direct the flow in the right direction. We need direction, which we are not getting from democratically elected Ministers.

My party is happy. There are no red lines preventing us going back into power, but it is clear that Sinn Féin are the obstacle to moving forward. It is time for us not to differ, but instead to look towards the things that we can agree on. That is where we should be. Whenever I talk to some of the Shinners they tell me that they want education and a better health system, but at the same time they draw a red line on the Irish language and other issues that we have some problems with. Since we are rudderless and this place has the ability to step in and step up, that must be done.

I cannot speak for other areas, but this is the place to speak for my constituents in Strangford in Northern Ireland. For the day-to-day running of the country, I urge the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, the bodies that we have heard so much about today, to influence and even instruct permanent secretaries to do the right thing. Decisions must not be made by public outcry, but by reasoned and considered information exchange, and that is not happening in Northern Ireland. Let us use our intergovernmental ability to unfreeze Northern Ireland and make it into the place where we educate our children, fix all of the health issues that are so important and get the operations done. Let our young people get a place in their excellent local university and have job opportunities and a stable future. That was the case some years ago, but that has changed and our modus operandi must change too.
Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is developing the thesis that he alluded to earlier. Does he agree with me that the vast majority of people outside the body politic would assess the progress or otherwise of intergovernmental conference working, whether it be on devolution or Europe, on how it affects them in their local society, how it affects their ability to get a job, and how it affects their schools and all the devolved issues? Those are the criteria by which we have to judge any success or otherwise. Does he agree that that is what the general public would adjudicate on?

3.12 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This debate is about the UK’s machinery for the framework of intergovernmental co-operation. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has approached it from a Scottish perspective and that much of the debate has centred on devolution. But the more I have listened to this debate the more I am convinced that it has implications for our future relationship with Europe. My reason for saying that comes from various perspectives. We have heard that this was about better ways of operating the union, but I think we also need to look at better ways of operating Europe. One of the ways in which we can do that is already in existence as an organisation of intergovernmental co-operation: the Council of Europe. I am pleased that all of the political parties represented in the Chamber have representatives on the Council of Europe. Not a single party here is not represented on the Council of Europe and the issue of devolution does not come up at all in the delegations. We act very well as a UK delegation.

The intergovernmental framework already exists and we already work together on a constructive basis. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling mentioned that it is better to work together, which is absolutely true. The Council of Europe works on the basis of consensus, not on the basis of legislative implications for the various countries there.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is developing the thesis that he alluded to earlier. Does he agree with me that the vast majority of people outside the body politic would assess the progress or otherwise of intergovernmental conference working, whether it be on devolution or Europe, on how it affects them in their local society, how it affects their ability to get a job, and how it affects their schools and all the devolved issues? Those are the criteria by which we have to judge any success or otherwise. Does he agree that that is what the general public would adjudicate on?

John Howell: I agree that that is how the public would look at it. I think that we have been absolutely useless at telling the public what the Council of Europe does. It operates across almost every main Department of Government in the UK. It operates across the Home Office, with an emphasis on terrorism and security. It also operates across the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport through the recommendations we put forward on football governance, for example. We need to send out a message about what the Council of Europe does and how it operates. It does not dictate laws to countries. Even its conventions are for Governments to decide whether to sign up to, rather than ones that they are forced into. For all those reasons I think that there is a great purpose in the future of our relationship in Europe being based on the Council of Europe.

The Prime Minister said that we are leaving the European Union, but not leaving Europe. She went on to say:

“We should not think of our leaving the EU as marking an ending, as much as a new beginning for the United Kingdom and our relationship with our European allies.”

I do not think that is a new beginning in itself. It is a beginning that can be founded in the Council of Europe. When we have that body in place, why on earth are we trying to reinvent the wheel and not using it for the purpose for which it was intended in 1949?

3.17 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this debate. He made a characteristically rumbustious speech that might be provocative in some quarters, but at no time can one accuse the hon. Gentleman of not engaging his grey cells, because there was a lot of new stuff and food for thought for us all in what he said.

First, I want to absolutely echo the remarks made physically on my right but politically on my left by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) about the fact that the Joint Ministerial Committee is a toothless tiger. It needs to beef up and be made real and I wholeheartedly endorse the comments that have been made. Secondly, no one knows better than a former Highland councillor or a representative of a Highland constituency just what has happened apropos the centralisation of powers in Edinburgh. The style of government that I see today is dramatically different, believe it or not, from that under Conservative Administrations long ago when there was more opportunity to do things differently and to negotiate with the Government and tailor-make solutions to suit the local area. Thirdly, the point made about Canada is absolutely apt. There is a mechanism there that we should look at because it works.

Some days ago I made a point in the Chamber about how 16 to 18-year-olds can buy knives in Scotland—carving knives or suchlike—and yet across the border in England they cannot. That seems to a lot of people I know, ordinary folk, to be dotty. The point was made to me by a colleague afterwards that knife crime is lower in Scotland. That is all very well, but it still means that someone can go and buy a knife across the border and come back, so that is hardly being a good neighbour. Many people have asked me what the point is in having drunk-driving laws on one side of the border that are different from those on the other. When I drive down to see my sister-in-law who lives in Northumberland, every time—not because I have a drink problem—I think to myself, “I am in England. I can have a pint now and I will not be pulled over and not be done for it.”

On the other hand, this is not at all an anti-devolution speech—before I am accused of making one. I am proud of my 12 years in the Scottish Parliament. Some Members present for the debate attended an event today about the Scottish food and drink industry. The fact that the Scottish Government are looking at a different, tailor-made approach to the obesity problem is wholly laudable, and other regions of the UK can learn from that. That is what I call a proper exercise of devolution, but where there is a mismatch in fundamental laws embracing the entire UK, across borders, we should think carefully.

My second point—to repeat myself—is one that I made on Monday. In addition to the matter of the Joint Ministerial Committee, there is a breakdown between institutions—between Westminster and Holyrood. I said twice in interventions on Monday night that there should be some cross-party mechanism for Back-Bench MPs and MSPs to engage and converse, and to have a dialogue to understand the needs and issues that both institutions face. Let us face it, dialogue never hurts. Some sort of mechanism should be set up, and to that
end I wrote this week to Mr Speaker and to Mr Kenneth Macintosh, the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. I hope that they will look favourably on the idea of considering proposals such as this. As other hon. Members have asked, what do we gain from dispute between the institutions? Nothing. Who loses? The citizens—the good people of Scotland.

3.21 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I have fond memories of happy days discussing constitutional machinery and frameworks for inter-governmental co-operation with people on the doorsteps of Edinburgh North and Leith in 2014. How engaged they all were with it. I love a bit of constitutional machinery, and the way it works so well when Governments co-operate for the greater good, as has been said. It is special—an aggregation that is greater than the sum of its parts. Each side benefits when Governments, sovereign in their own rights—none subservient to another and none in a position to overrule another unilaterally—benefit all the more. Both of their nations by agreeing to move forward. That is a description of the EU, by the way, as has been mentioned. A supranational organisation with co-operation between nations delivers benefits for all that no nation could achieve on its own. They put aside their differences and any petty mistrust they may have, agree common rules and laws and tear down barriers. None has the right to impose on another and none can say “We will keep this power here,” or “You don’t know enough to do this yourself”.

That is the difference between confederal co-operation and controlled devolution; between sovereignty being pooled only with the consent of individual nations and power devolved being power retained; and between parity of esteem and patronising guff from a Parliament and Government that think they are above all else. That is the difference between the Canadian federal system of which the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke so glowingly and the uneven, unfair devolved set-up that promises many rights but delivers few. I find it difficult to envisage the Canadian federal Government dictating laws to the Governments of the provinces in the way that the UK Government aggressively and contumaciously forced measures through last week.

Luke Graham: In using the Canadian example I think the hon. Lady misinterprets what my hon. Friend was saying. He was talking about a mechanism. The histories of our two countries are very different. I should hope that the hon. Lady would appreciate that. Canada was of our two countries are very different. I should hope saying. He was talking about a mechanism. The histories of our two countries are very different. I should hope that the hon. Lady would appreciate that. Canada was an aggregation that is greater than the sum of its parts. Each side benefits when Governments, sovereign in their own rights—none subservient to another and none in a position to overrule another unilaterally—benefit all the more. Both of their nations by agreeing to move forward. That is a description of the EU, by the way, as has been mentioned. A supranational organisation with co-operation between nations delivers benefits for all that no nation could achieve on its own. They put aside their differences and any petty mistrust they may have, agree common rules and laws and tear down barriers. None has the right to impose on another and none can say “We will keep this power here,” or “You don’t know enough to do this yourself”.

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Luke Graham: In using the Canadian example I think the hon. Lady misinterprets what my hon. Friend was saying. He was talking about a mechanism. The histories of our two countries are very different. I should hope that the hon. Lady would appreciate that. Canada was separate states that then came together in union. We are one unitary state with devolution taking a part. It is a completely different constitutional framework. I hope that the hon. Lady appreciates that.

Deidre Brock: I perfectly understand that, but I do not think I should have to accept it. It is an odd argument to make.

Of course, we could have had the debate in a forum where it matters—in debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. If only there were a Government with class and confidence in Whitehall, rather than a collection of desperate individuals who act with all the finesse of a tap dancing wildebeest. The sheer cowardice displayed in refusing to programme properly for debate on devolved issues was as appalling as the contempt shown by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—of all offices—who made sure that he talked away any chance of a contribution from anyone else, before leaving the Chamber with a grin, and a spring in his step.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): As to the point made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) about the different histories, I am unaware—perhaps the hon. Lady can enlighten me—but was not there a union of the two crowns, in the Acts of Union, between Scotland and England?

Deidre Brock: Yes, there was indeed. There was a union of the crowns in around 1605. [Interruption.] Forgive me—1603, indeed, under James VI.

Surely there can never have been a Government so tone deaf about such a crucial constitutional debate as the one who decided that what I have described was the way to handle things. When we think back through the list of Prime Ministers who have navigated their way through Parliaments in this building there are some nuptiaries but there are few who would have made such a breathtaking mistake as to allow that contempt to show so openly, and even fewer who would not have been advised well by others around the Cabinet table of the danger into which they were putting themselves—the Government and the United Kingdom that they so preciously guard.

The current Prime Minister, one of the least able of all recent holders of the office—worse even than Gordon Brown—is poorly advised by her colleagues, ill advised by her staff and not advised by the Secretary of State for Scotland. He is posted missing—not quite absent but certainly not present. He is not engaged in Whitehall on Scotland’s behalf, but is busy in Scotland on Whitehall’s behalf.

Stephen Kerr: I hope the people of Scotland are watching, as the hon. Lady is personifying every aspect of nationalism that I described in my speech.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady continues, may I say that I want to bring in the Scottish National party spokesman at 28 minutes past, so that everyone on the Front Benches gets 10 minutes each?

Deidre Brock: Thank you, Mr Wilson. Yes, I am perfectly aware that the people of Scotland, or some of them, certainly, will be watching. I am not sure that I personify the kind of nationalism of which the hon. Member for Stirling constantly tries to portray the SNP as proponents. Of course I am an Australian, and half English. He might be advised to remember that.

If George Younger were Banquo the current Macbeth would wonder what he was on about. Younger’s boast that UK Government decisions on Scotland were made in Edinburgh, not London, would never pass the lips of the current Scotland Secretary. His constitutional machinery has broken down. He is not Scotland’s man in Whitehall, or even Whitehall’s man in Scotland. He is simply Whitehall’s voice in Scotland—a dunnerin brass. He is the propaganda man under whose tenure Scotland Office spin doctor spending has gone through the roof, reaching three quarters of a million pounds this year. On his watch advertising spending on social media has become...
[Deidre Brock]
a Scotland Office priority, excluding people who have
an interest in Scottish independence from a marketing
campaign trying to suggest that Scotland needs the UK
more than we need the EU, but including people with
an interest in RAF Lossiemouth in a campaign about
the budget. Then, of course, there was the online advertising
campaign that was run entirely in his constituency.

The UK Government talk a lot about Scotland having
two Governments, and about how they should work
together, but there is a chasm between the suggestion
that there is still a respect agenda and the reality, where
a Secretary of State uses his office of state to attack
Scotland’s Government, denigrate the politicians who
are trying to improve Scotland, and undermine the very
fabric of devolution. We have seen a sustained and
unrelenting attack on the choices that Scots have made—and
on none more than the decision we made to stay in
the EU. We have seen the disregard, disrespect and
contempt in which the UK Government has held those
choices.

Jamie Stone: May I direct the hon. Lady’s attention
to the second point that I made in my speech? Will she
support my notion of a Buck-Bench cross-party joint
liaison committee between both institutions?

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon.
Lady continues, perhaps I can say that she is eating into
the time of her party spokesman.

Deidre Brock: I would be perfectly happy to speak
about the suggestion of the hon. Member for Caithness,
Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on some
future date.

Scotland’s Parliament voted for the UK Withdrawal
from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland)
Bill; Scots MPs wanted to debate the implications of
the EU question for devolved Administrations; the
Scots Government offered compromise and conversation,
and at every step the UK Tory Government turned a
sneering, contemptuous face away. The constitutional
machinery and the frameworks for intergovernmental
co-operation on these islands will work only if the
political will is shown, if there is mutual respect, and if
they are allowed to. They do not work, and that is the
fault of Whitehall Ministers.

3.30 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a
pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.
I had hoped that more Members would be present
today, but I realise that this feels a little like a break-out
group from the main plenary in the Chamber of the
House of Commons.

I have two preliminary points. First, the last time I
replied to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)
in a debate that he initiated in Westminster Hall, I said
that I would not congratulate him because I felt that he
was being extremely partisan in using this forum for
debate to attack the Scottish National party. On this
occasion, I welcome the fact that he has initiated this
debate, and I congratulate him on the way that he
conducted himself during the first half of his speech.
There were moments when he perorated on constitutional
and democratic theory, and I would respect that in any
debate in this Chamber. Unfortunately, he got ahead of
himself. He could not really help himself, and he went
into his usual rehearsed invective against my party, the
Scottish Government and, I suppose by implication, the
40% of the Scottish electorate who support what we
argue for. That was a bit of a shame. I feel that he let
himself down at the end, but there we go—something is
better than nothing.

My other preliminary point concerns what a number of
Members have said about the events of last week,
which they described as some sort of theatrical
parliamentary stunt, or apparent walkout, by my party.
That situation arose last Wednesday because of what
had happened the day before, when we were given
19 minutes to discuss all the consequences of the Lords
amendments to the Brexit Bill in the context of Scottish
devolution, Welsh devolution, and the whole question
of Ireland and the Irish border. Nineteen minutes—one
minute for every year that devolution has existed. I think
everyone will agree that that was woefully inadequate;
I hope that even the Minister will agree with that.
When the leader of my party tried to protest about that
lack of—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman
is taking us away from the subject at hand. If he could
concentrate on the motion before us that would be more
than welcome.

Tommy Sheppard: I will take your guidance, Mr Wilson,
but I am responding to the debate and those accusations
were made. I want to put on the record that we attempted
to protest about that lack of opportunity to represent
our constituents, and I feel that a better Prime Minister
would have acknowledged that and provided more time.
Instead she was dismissive of the leader of my party,
who then got into a row with the Speaker who expelled
him from the House. I do not know what else we could
have done at that juncture except walk out in solidarity.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I fear not. I suspect that the Chair
does not want us to get into a discussion about the
events of last Wednesday.

Let me turn to the motion before us. It is good that
we are discussing this issue now, because it is topical
and relevant. We are in the middle of a process that is all
about relations between the United Kingdom Government
and the devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom.
Government Members have suggested that when I use
phrases such as “power grab”, not only am I over-eggging
the pudding, but I am completely misrepresenting the
position. Apparently there is no power grab whatsoever;
there is a powers bonanza with a huge list of powers
being given to the Scottish Government—indeed, that
list was read out in the Chamber last week. From the
Labour Benches, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South
(Ian Murray) says, “Actually, you are both wrong. It is
neither a power grab nor a powers bonanza. Those are
partisan arguments from two parties, one in government
in Scotland, and one in government in the UK.”

I would like to test the arguments about a power grab.
First, one must distinguish between responsibility for a
particular area, and the power to execute and change
policy in that area. It is proposed that the Scottish Government should get a list of additional responsibilities after powers are repatriated from Brussels post-Brexit, but they will have much less authority and power than they currently have to do anything about those responsibilities. In 24 major areas—the most significant ones—the way that the Scottish Government discharge their responsibilities will be subject to a United Kingdom framework. We do not know the details of that framework because the discussion has not even got that far. So far in the Joint Ministerial Committee on Europe, and other forums, there has been a discussion on the principles of how those arrangements might work, but it is the principles that are the problem.

Let me illustrate that by an example. Suppose after Brexit, we have a joint committee of the United Kingdom, involving the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Administrations, to discuss agricultural policy. In that body, the interests of Scottish farmers would be represented by the Scottish Government or their appointees, and likewise for Wales and possibly Northern Ireland. The interests of English farmers would be represented by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—a Westminster Department. Why? Because there is no other body to do that for English farmers. There is no English Government or representative for English farmers.

I agree that English farmers need to be represented thoroughly in those discussions. The problem is that when there is a difference of opinion between the components of those arrangements, DEFRA will decide what happens. As well as advocating for the interests of one party, it will sit as judge and jury in deciding what happens for everyone else. That effectively means that this Parliament—Westminster—always gets to dictate what happens to the devolved Assemblies. There are two potential ways round that. One is to find another way of representing English farmers, such as by having an English Parliament or some other body, and the other is to allow DEFRA to continue to do that, but to have an independent arbiter as part of the arrangements that can arbitrate in disputes, supported by all parties and according to an agreed set of rules. That is exactly the proposition that the Scottish Government put forward in the JMC, but it was dismissed by the Westminster Government. We have therefore stalled the discussions about joint arrangements because there is no agreement in principle. We must return to the realisation that if we are to make this work, there must be a partnership between the component parts of the UK.

I do not accept for a minute that the Scottish Government should get a list of responsibilities, and the English Government should get a list of responsibilities, and it is suggested that we do not have a conversation. I do not accept for a minute that we need such joint arrangements. I think that is nonsense. No one is arguing that would affect the United Kingdom's ability to undertake trade deals. I think that is nonsense.

Let me illustrate that, because at the moment there are differences. Take liquor retail, for example, which I worked in before I became a Member of the House. At the moment there are completely different regulations north and south of the border. For example, the previous Licensing Act prohibited the use of incentives to buy alcohol through discounting—we cannot have a three-for-two offer in Scotland.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. I hope the hon. Gentleman is bringing his remarks to a close because I want to bring in two other Front-Bench speakers and allow time for the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

**Tommy Sheppard:** I am sorry, Mr Wilson. I thought I had 10 minutes, but I will bring my remarks to a close. At the moment, retailers and wholesalers in Scotland have different point of sale presentations, and different packaging on products. That is really not a problem—people are trying to make it one but it does not exist.

Finally, my beliefs have been caricatured and misrepresented in this debate. SNP Members have been called “nationalists” in the same sort of breath with which one might describe a pervert or somebody who has something wrong with them. Mine is a legitimate belief and not something that seeks to divide people—far from it. It is something that seeks to bring people together and allow them to exercise their democratic expression. What it boils down to is a belief that the people who live in Scotland should be the ones who control what happens in Scotland. We wish that power for the Scottish people in order to engage better with our neighbours. We seek not to put up fences but to break them down, and to have better arrangements for the whole island and the whole continent. In order to do that, people in Scotland must have the authority to make those deals and strike that mission for themselves.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Before I call the Labour Front-Bench speaker, let me say that I would like to bring in the Minister at 3.48 pm.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** On a point of order, Mr Wilson. I fear that we will be voting at that time.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** We could be. Fifteen minutes will be allowed for the vote, and then we will come back for the remainder of the sitting.

3.39 pm

**Lesley Laird** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I compliment the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this debate. It is almost as though it was meant to take place this week, given recent events. However, I am mindful that it would have been unnecessary if the suggestions that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) made and the amendments that the Labour party tabled relating to the operation of the JMC and the Scotland Act 1998 were taken on board, but here we are.

We are discussing the constitutional machinery and frameworks for intergovernmental operation at a time when it has never been so evident that they are fundamentally broken. In particular, they are not working
well between the UK and Scottish Governments. Over the past few weeks, we have seen behaviour that people in Scotland find somewhat distasteful. Officers of government have not come forward when we have needed them to do so. The Secretary of State indicated that the UK is not a partnership, and that Scotland is just part of the United Kingdom—not helpful language, in the context of this debate—and the Scottish Parliament was overruled. I do not think anyone can disagree with that analysis of where we are. There is a general feeling that Scotland’s voice is not being heard in the Brexit process. Again, I do not think anyone could disagree with that. We have witnessed walkouts and the Secretary of State going AWOL from the Dispatch Box. Many Members have been trying to foster dialogue, but the cancellation of two JMCs in recent weeks shows that is not happening.

Once again, I have come to the Chamber with some constructive proposals to improve the situation. The Joint Ministerial Committee is completely and utterly impotent. It can be called to meet only at the Government’s behest. It did not meet for eight months—those were eight months of lost opportunity, in which work could have been done to avoid some of the issues we face today—and we have missed two meetings in the past few weeks. We do not have minutes of the meetings. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) talked about arbitration. If minutes were published, we would all have had the opportunity to contribute to that debate. Even when the meetings take place, they have no statutory underpinning, which is a fundamental flaw. I do not believe that, in this modern and open democracy, that is how we should conduct discussions between our Governments. It must change.

Labour offered a viable solution during the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill debates. We want the JMC to be put on a statutory footing, and we want it to produce a report and minutes. We want it to report to the Commons, and we want every single member and Government represented on the committee to be kept informed about and consulted on the UK’s Brexit negotiations at every turn. However, that proposal was rejected by the Conservative Government, who appear to have absolutely no understanding of devolution or of the fact that the tactics they have been deploying are fuelling the frustrations that the hon. Member for Stirling referred to.

The amendments that my fellow Scot, Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, proposed to the withdrawal Bill would have established a council of Ministers—an advisory body bringing together Ministers from the devolved Administrations and the UK Government. That would have helped to ensure that the devolved Administrations and the advisory panel could make recommendations that the Government were required to take account of and make provisions to implement. It is important to make it clear that this is not about frustrating Brexit; it is about recognising that the current settlements are not working. On the back of Brexit, it is even more important that these mechanisms work clearly and effectively, and that legislators across our countries are co-ordinated.

On Monday, we heard about the desire of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) to see a parliamentary council made up of Members of this place and of the Scottish Parliament. We should look at that proposal carefully, as we believe it could take the heat out of the argument we are currently involved in.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House, so shall we suspend for 15 minutes and come back for 4 o’clock. If there is more than one Division, the sitting will remain suspended for 15 minutes for each vote.

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.6 pm

On resuming—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Let me just say that I did ask people to be back here for 4 o’clock; if there had been another vote, we could still have come back. We should have started at 4 o’clock. It is now six minutes past, and the next debate is being delayed. The only person who turned up for 4 o’clock was the Minister. Lesley Laird, would you like to continue your speech?

Lesley Laird: Thank you, Mr Wilson. Before the Division, I pointed out that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross had highlighted a proposal during the week. I am asking that we all look at that proposal carefully. We believe that it could take the heat out of the argument in which we are currently involved. But what is vital is that any council of the type that we are discussing has some authority, because if it does not, we are back to square one, with the UK Government holding all the cards.

I have come to the conclusion that the UK and the Scottish Government have been approaching this all wrong. Rather than trying to rectify the root cause of the problem, they are trying to tackle the inevitable outcomes of a flawed system. That will happen again and again on the Trade Bill and on every single, and subsequent, piece of Brexit legislation, so today I would like simply to do one thing. I urge the Minister to get the UK and Scottish Governments around the table. The difference is that this time it is not to argue about the intricacies of one clause of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Instead, we must look at the fundamental problems with our current constitutional arrangements and establish how we can improve them for the benefit of the people we are here to serve.

We believe that the talks could form a memorandum of understanding between the Governments about where we go from here and how we address the real concerns that have arisen about devolution in the UK. Then, and only then, should we start trying to deal with the minutiae. It is time to break the stand-off and come to an arrangement that will work for all partners of the United Kingdom in the long term. The Labour party stands committed, as it has always done, to facilitating and engaging in the talks. I sincerely hope that the Minister and the UK Government can give us the requested assurances today.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Minister, before you start, I point out that this debate has to finish by 4.21 pm. If you could leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion, that would be great.
4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for requesting the debate, and I shall of course be sure to leave him time to respond to what has been said. He has prompted a rich exchange on intergovernmental relations, and I thank him for doing so. I am also grateful to other hon. Members for all the contributions that have been made.

This is, after all, a timely debate, considering various recent events, but I shall preface my remarks on the subject by thinking about the principles that we operate on in our constitution, such as it is. We do not have a codified constitution such as Canada’s, to provide a model for other countries around the world to use. Instead, we have the product of organic history, as my hon. Friend said. We have a flexible approach that allows us to respond as circumstances demand and, crucially, to reflect the different ways in which we have, across the four nations of the United Kingdom, reached today’s point.

I was conscious of the remarks with which my hon. Friend began. He said that we ought not to aim for artificial uniformity, and that we should not ignore either the history of how we got here or the present-day realities. That was a very helpful reminder of the principles that we might use to approach today’s debate. How do we keep the structures that we have fit for the future? That is the question on which I wish to offer some thoughts to the Chamber.

Our exit from the European Union of course prompts a range of extremely challenging considerations. We need to ensure that our statute book continues to function, to examine those areas of policy in which EU law has created consistent UK-wide practices to date, and to ensure that our intergovernmental ways of working continue to be fit for purpose. Crucially, as the Prime Minister has made clear, we need to safeguard the integrity of our precious Union—I, too, am a strong believer in that.

It is imperative, as the UK leaves the EU, that all the Administrations of the UK benefit from a unified approach. That is only possible through the strength of our relationships and our joint working. The Joint Ministerial Committee structure that has been discussed today provides that but, while it has served us well, it is still evolving. That is important, and there is a very current example of that.

Recently, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and I chaired an additional forum with the devolved Administrations under that structure—that was only on 24 May—and we look forward to the next one soon. In itself, that is an example of the flexibility in our constitutional arrangements that let us convene that group fast and effectively.

We have found ourselves in times that our colleagues in the devolved Administrations agree are not normal, but the Government are absolutely committed to working closely with those Administrations to ensure full engagement and smooth transition across the breadth of what we need to do to leave the EU. That was very obvious during the months that were spent working with the Scottish and Welsh Governments and Northern Ireland civil servants on revised proposals for the EU withdrawal Bill, which the Welsh Government have confirmed safeguard devolution and the future of a successful United Kingdom.

The ways in which we work with the devolved Administrations are supported by departmental structures inside the UK Government. For example, as part of my own Department, there is a thing called the UK governance group, which brings together the whole of the UK Government’s work on constitutional and devolution issues under the oversight of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. It brings together the Cabinet Office’s constitutional work, the Scotland and Wales Offices, and the office of the Advocate General, and it works closely with the Northern Ireland Office. We can therefore conduct that work to strengthen and maintain the Union across all Departments as a shared responsibility. That is very important, allowing us to have detailed expertise and, crucially, to hear the voice of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland at the very highest levels of Government through the Secretaries of State who relate to those Offices.

As well as getting on with our immediate business—not least leaving the EU—and considering the structures that facilitate that, we must also look to the future. As hon. Members will know, our departure from the EU will result in a significant increase in the decision-making powers and responsibilities of the devolved Administrations. New responsibilities will go to Edinburgh, Cardiff and—once a new Executive is formed—Belfast. In some of those areas, the UK Government and the devolved Administrations will continue to work closely in frameworks across the whole of the UK. That will be done through principles that have been agreed through all the devolved Administrations.

As we set up those arrangements, one thing is clear: the success of each of them surely will rely on the strength of our relationships and of the partnerships and collaboration that have been a theme of the debate. It is so important that we work together to put arrangements in place that stand the test of time. We must seek to achieve that in order to provide certainty for people and businesses living and operating in the UK and the flexibility to adapt should that be needed.

Hon. Members considered during the debate how we can improve existing intergovernmental structures. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling in particular for laying out his vision, but I also note the suggestions by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) about the Council of Europe. Let me also take a moment to thank the Select Committees of both Houses and of the devolved legislatures, as well as academics, for their suggestions about this subject. This is, as I said, a rich and timely debate.

The UK Government recognise the need to ensure that our structures are adaptable and fit for the future. The Prime Minister led a discussion about this very issue at the plenary meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee in March, at which Ministers agreed to review existing intergovernmental structures and the memorandum of understanding. That review rightly provides us with an opportunity to look carefully at the current ways of working between the different Administrations. It means we can learn from the existing arrangements that work well, listen to the ideas that have been put forward today, and improve less effective structures as we put our future frameworks in place.
We have to ensure that intergovernmental structures and agreements remain adaptable enough to address the interests of the four Governments and their people at any given time. As we do so, we should continue to reflect on our unique circumstances—the different settlements and the constitutional history that led us to this place. The UK is not Canada, after all—close friends though we are. We can certainly learn from other countries, but it is important that we get this right.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the Minister for her remarks, and all the Members who participated in the debate. It was lively and robust, as one would have anticipated, but there was also a huge degree of agreement that we need to work together to improve the processes by which our country works. Only when all parts of the United Kingdom, all levels of government and all the Parliaments and Assemblies work together will we be able to achieve the great things we all hope for for our country. Ultimately, that is tied up with the prosperity and wellbeing of our people. They sent us here to do that, and we must set our minds to that task.

I look forward to further engagement and discussion with Members across the House about these ideas and proposals. I hope that we can come together to reach an outcome that stands the test of time, as the Minister described. I agree with her that there have been many helpful contributions to the debate about this issue, principally by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which has done some fabulous work. We need to build on all that to secure the future of the United Kingdom and an ever strengthened and better Union.

The hon. Gentleman said.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered UK constitutional machinery and frameworks for intergovernmental co-operation.

4.19 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK and Polish war reparations from Germany.

Last year, I visited Warsaw to receive an award on behalf of my family for the brother of my grandfather Jan Kawczynski. He was acutely aware that in Poland there was the death penalty for hiding Jewish friends and neighbours. Nevertheless, he took the risk and hid many of his Jewish friends and neighbours on his estate. As a result of doing that, the Germans killed him and his entire family. When he returned to his estate, the Germans instructed him to take off his officer’s boots. They made him watch as they shot his 12-year-old daughter in front of him. Then, they shot his wife. Jan Kawczynski was my age at the time he was shot by the Germans. His 12-year-old daughter who was shot in front of him was almost the same age as my daughter Alexis. It was a very moving moment for me and the Kawczynskis to pick up this award for him and his family. It brought back to me the emotional issue of just how much Poland suffered during the second world war at the hands of the German invaders. The attitude of the Germans to war reparations can be summed up very eloquently in three Polish words that were sent to me by my friends in the Polish Parliament: przemilczenie, przedawnienie and zapomnienie. That basically means that they want to silence the debate. They want to show that the debate is outdated and from a bygone era that is no longer relevant to today. They want to forget it.

There has been no resolution to this issue; no formal treaty has been signed between Germany and Poland since the second world war. Bearing in mind the huge loss of life, the buildings that were destroyed and the works of art that were stolen from Poland, this issue simply will not go away. I pay tribute to our friends in the Polish Parliament, in particular my friend Arkadiusz Mularczyk, who has been tasked by the Polish Government with compiling a major dossier to look at the practicality of Poland being able to take Germany to a tribunal to seek war reparations. Of course, the Minister will know that article 3 of the Hague convention of 1907, a copy of which I have before me, clearly states the responsibility of an aggressor nation such as Germany in ensuring that there is proper compensation for all aspects of an invasion of this kind.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the Chamber. If there are going to be any reparations, which quite clearly the hon. Gentleman requests and which I support, let us start with an apology to Polish people from Germany for its actions. Has that ever been done?

Daniel Kawczynski: I did not quite hear everything the hon. Gentleman said.

Jim Shannon: Was there an apology from the Germany to the Polish people for its actions during the second world war? If there are to be any reparations, that starts with an apology from the German nation to the Polish nation.
Daniel Kawczynski: That is a very good point and I do not believe there has actually been a formal apology to the Polish nation and people. Germany has not publicly stated to Poland the importance of apologising for what happened and of granting compensation. I have spoken to many Germans this week. They say, “Look, this is an issue that we have already dealt with. We reached an agreement with the Polish Government.” I say, “Which Polish Government?” They say, “The Polish communist Government.” They claimed that they reached an agreement with the Polish communist Governments in 1970 and thereafter. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman will know, those Polish Governments were completely illegitimate. Poland, trapped behind the iron curtain as a result of the Yalta agreement, had no legitimate Government.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Is it not a matter of historical fact that the Soviet Union leaned on its puppet Polish Government to stop any reparations? That is the basis of what stands now, and that cannot be right.

Daniel Kawczynski: Absolutely. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The Soviet Union wanted some form of peace in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Soviet bloc—bear in the mind the importance of getting along with East Germany—so Poland was forced by the Soviet Union to keep quiet and not ask for any compensation. These Communist dictators, whose names are indelibly imprinted on my mind—Bierut, Gomulka, Gierek, Kania and Jaruzelski—were Soviet puppets, imposed on us, who had no right to sign any documentation. Anything signed with the Germans is non-valid and illegal.

The only thing I consider to be valid is the agreement of 1990, where a free Poland, alongside Britain, France and the Soviet Union, signed an agreement with the new Germany—Germany was being reunified—guaranteeing Polish western borders. Exchange of territory in that treaty, whether former east Prussia or Silesia—all those lands—is legitimate. All the previous agreements simply do not hold water because of the illegality of the communist regime.

The Minister will have to correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding from the Library and other sources is that the Germans have paid a total of €75 billion in compensation to other countries for war damage. I find that figure breathtakingly small. When we bear in mind that we are being told to stump up £40 billion for having the temerity to leave the European Union, it is amazing that the Germans have paid only €75 billion for the complete destruction of our continent and the murder of millions of people. Apparently, only 2% of that €75 billion has so far trickled down to Poland. The country worst affected by the second world war has received less than €1 billion in compensation.

I want to read out some of the horrifying statistics, which are indelibly imprinted on my mind. I thank my Polish teacher, Mrs Wątrobcka, for helping me to translate some of this information. Some 2 million Poles were slaughtered during the second world war by the German invaders, and—hon. Members should remember this—for every 1,000 citizens, Poland lost 220: a fifth. Think about that for a moment. Out of a thousand people in a community, wherever you go, 220 are killed. By comparison, the United Kingdom lost eight, Belgium 7, Holland 22 and France 15. Poland lost 220 of every thousand citizens.

More than 200,000 children—the ones who looked Germanic—were kidnapped by the Germans and taken to Germany for the process of Germanisation. Some 590,000 people were left forever disabled. More than 1 million people fell ill as a result of tuberculosis, and many of them died, because so many people were kept in such horrific conditions, particularly in forced labour camps. Just under 2.5 million people were exploited in labour camps, and a further 2.5 million were displaced. In 1939 alone, 38% of all Poland’s wealth was stolen.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) is present, and he represents one of our cities that was worst affected by Luftwaffe bombing. In Warsaw, the city of my birth, 90% of factories, 72% of buildings and 90% of the cultural heritage were destroyed and 700,000 people were killed. Of the country’s cultural heritage as a whole, 43% was destroyed or stolen in 1939. I am in discussions with Sotheby’s and many other important British auction houses to track down the huge amount of Polish art and literature that was stolen and taken away by the Germans as they plundered Poland and then escaped.

My Polish teacher, Mrs Wątrobcka, gave me another point. During the war, a large number of people were experimented on. No one mentions the children who suffered those experiments and who forever remain mentally ill or physically disfigured.

A senior Conservative MP—I will not say who—said to me, “Do not raise this issue now, old boy, we do not want to upset the Germans when we are negotiating Brexit.” Needless to say, I have ignored his advice, because a time of major change on the European continent, as we pull out of the European Union and regain our sovereignty, independence and foreign policy, is exactly the time to raise the issue and to help our Polish allies to get the compensation that they deserve.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a timely debate. Quite frankly, these issues should have been raised many years ago, and that is not the hon. Gentleman’s fault. We owe it to the Polish people to do what we can to get back some of the treasures that he has described. Coventry was badly bombed, so people there understand. I am sure that he knows we have a fair-sized Polish contingent in Coventry who would be very interested in the debate.

Daniel Kawczynski: We have had huge support. Let us not forget that there are now 1 million Poles living in our country. Poland is the second-most spoken language on our island after English. I am very proud of the contribution that those 1 million Poles make to our country. As I tour the United Kingdom and meet Polish organisations, they repeatedly raise this issue with me. It is such an issue of honour for them and their families.
What message would it send if we chose to forget the suffering of those who were killed or tortured during the second world war? The proudest moment of my parliamentary career was going to the RAF club with Lord Tebbit. In front of an Anglo-Polish dinner, he said something that will resonate with me for ever—of course, I have told my daughter about it and I will tell as many children as I can. He said that the Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force were so evenly matched in 1940 that the arrival of the Polish pilots that summer tipped the balance in our favour. Lord Tebbit and others say that we may well have lost the battle of Britain if it had not been for those Polish pilots. Of course it is possible to replace planes relatively quickly, but it takes a long time to train up pilots, and it was the bravery of those pilots—those Polish pilots—that secured freedom for us.

Let us not forget that the Polish 303 Squadron got the highest number of kills during the battle of Britain and was the single largest foreign contingent in the RAF. Let us not forget that General Anders brought the Polish Free Army out of Poland, through the Soviet Union and Iran, to meet up with the British 8th Army. The Poles trained in Palestine; they joined the British 8th Army; they fought at El Alamein and at Tobruk; they went through the whole of north Africa; and as the hon. Member for Coventry South will remember, they took Monte Cassino. The most difficult part of the Gustav line was won and secured by those brave Poles at Monte Cassino. And let us not forget that the Poles were there at the Arnhem landings.

Let us also not forget, however, what happened when we secured victory in 1945. Guess who was prevented from joining us in the victory parade—the Poles. After everything that they had contributed during the second world war to help us, the Poles were banned by the Government at the time from joining the victory parade, for fear of upsetting Stalin.

We have a duty, a blood duty, a duty of honour to the Poles to ensure that we use our position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a major European power to make sure that we help Poland to get this compensation.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman has covered the point I was going to make, which was about Monte Cassino, where the Poles suffered terrible casualties. He has already covered that point, so I am just reinforcing what he has said.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for that intervention.

Mr Lord: I think that Members here in Westminster Hall would be interested to know the current Polish Government’s attitude and policy with regard to this very important but obviously difficult issue.

Daniel Kawczynski: I will come on to that right at the end of my speech, if I may, to sum up.

Let me quickly turn now to British war reparations, because this debate, of course, is about Polish and British war reparations. We have in Westminster Hall the hon. Member for Coventry South, whose city was more affected than any other in the bombing that Britain experienced during the second world war.

In March, I asked the Minister what the British Government’s position is on our claims to war reparations, bearing in mind that the United Kingdom was completely bankrupt at the end of the second world war. We had had to borrow money to fight the war; many British cities had been destroyed; and many British lives had been lost in liberating half the continent of Europe. The answer came back that we had renounced all claims to compensation in 1990, upon the reunification of Germany. I want to know why we renounced our claims in 1990. I can understand why we would want to celebrate and wish the two countries—East Germany and West Germany—every success in coming together, but I want to know why, and how, that decision on British reparations was taken.

I then subsequently asked what consultations there had been with veterans—British war veterans—in making the decision to abandon all war reparations claims. The answer came back as follows: “Records on this are not readily available. To find this information would incur disproportionate cost.”

Well, I am in discussions with veterans’ organisations and we have put together a team of leading British barristers who are willing, on a pro bono basis, to test this matter through the British courts. I very much hope that those veterans who are listening to or watching this debate on television around the United Kingdom will take note and get in touch with my office, to see if they would like to be part of this attempt to take Germany to court, through our own High Court, to receive compensation.

There is a huge battle ahead for us—for the United Kingdom—as we pull out of the European Union. Poland will have to decide whether she wants to join us and the United States of America in an Atlanticist organisation based on sovereign nation states co-operating on defence and working collaboratively to protect one another through NATO, thereby retaining her sovereignty, currency and independence, or whether she will go along with Germany’s project for a single European superstate, with a single currency, a single European army, a single foreign policy and the rest of it. If Germany is serious in trying to convince Poland to back her in her quest to create a genuine European Union, this issue has to be resolved. Otherwise, I believe Poland will increasingly side with the United Kingdom and America in an alternative alliance.

This has been the most emotional debate I have ever participated in. Bearing in mind how my own family were shot and imprisoned, how our estates were burned to the ground and how all those working for the Kawczynskis were murdered, I will not rest until this issue is resolved.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I remind Members that the debate is entitled to run until 4.51 pm.

4.40 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The issue of reparations was considered in detail at the Paris reparations conference of 1945. The final act of the conference, which came into force on 24 January 1946, set out the international agreement that had been reached. In 1953, Poland’s then communist Government recognised that Germany had fulfilled its financial obligations with regard to Poland and decided against seeking compensation.
In 1990, the treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany was signed by West Germany, East Germany, the US, the UK, the Soviet Union and France. It allowed the recently reunited Germany to have full sovereignty over its internal and external affairs. The Government considers that that treaty definitively settled between the parties matters arising out of the second world war. The treaty was laid before the House for clearance under the Ponsonby rule. The Government have no plans to reopen any claim for reparations from Germany in respect of losses sustained during world war two, including for damage caused to UK cities.

In Poland, the issue of financial reparations from Germany came to the fore in July 2017, when it was raised by the PiS Law and Justice party leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, and again in September 2017 when it was raised by the then Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło. She argued, as we have heard this afternoon, that decisions made by the Polish communist authorities were subject to pressure from the Soviet Union and were therefore not necessarily valid.

In August and September 2017, the German Bundestag and Polish Parliament analysed the matter and, in separate reports, came to opposite conclusions. The German report concludes that decisions made by the communist regime were fully valid, and that Poland officially relinquished its claims in 1953. The Polish report, on the other hand, concludes that Poland’s right to reparations had not expired under international law, and that Poland had an ongoing right to claim reparations from Germany.

When Polish Foreign Minister Czaputowicz visited Berlin in 2018, he and the then German Foreign Minister Gabriel agreed to set up a joint Polish-German commission on the issue. It is not yet clear whether that proposal has been agreed by the current German Government, and if it has, when such a commission might be created. Clearly, this is a matter for Poland and Germany to decide.

The Government consider the issue of German reparations to have been settled by the treaty on the final settlement in 1990. We believe that there are risks in the Polish Government’s reopening the issue with Germany, as we have made clear to the Polish Government. However, the question of whether they choose to take the issue forward and how it is resolved is clearly a matter for Poland and Germany to decide. For our part, the UK believes that we must never forget the lessons of history, but nor should we dwell on the past.

Question put and agreed to.
areas such as distribution in warehouses and our public sector means that too many people in my constituency simply cannot be certain that their job will last longer than the next rota. No matter how hard they work, their precarious employment leaves them with no chance to save up or plan for the future.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that a characteristic of the gig economy is that on the one hand companies make enormous profits, while on the other workforces live in permanent insecurity, with all that means for their living standards and their family life? Will she join me in congratulating the GMB for the landmark challenges it has mounted—in particular, to the grotesque abuses characterised by Uber?

**Stephanie Peacock**: I totally agree, and I join my hon. Friend in congratulating GMB. He is right: many employees are forced into debt and are unable to pay their bills or buy food, and others are forced to work through physical or mental illness out of fear of losing what employment they have.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I have heard from members of our trade union, GMB, who work in warehouses in Yorkshire on relentless shift patterns, which means that they never actually get a weekend. Inevitably, that has an impact on their mental health. Does she agree that we cannot improve people’s mental health without improving their working standards?

**Stephanie Peacock**: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I believe she is referring to research from the GMB trade union, which shows that, across the country, 61% of insecure workers have gone to work while feeling unwell for fear of losing pay, hours or even their job. The same percentage have suffered mental health issues. For their troubles, they are often first out of the door when times are hard, and are cast into a welfare state that is not fit to help them.

It is not just workers who suffer. Companies’ widespread avoidance of the minimum wage, holiday pay and sick leave is estimated to cost the public purse £300 million a year in lost national insurance contributions. Such practices undermine the many employers who play by the rules, the companies that invest in their workers’ skills and training, the family-run businesses that pay their staff a decent wage, and the employers who pay their taxes and make pension contributions. In one way or another, we are all footing the bill for the businesses that take advantage of precarious work. Action is long overdue.

It is a little over a year to the day since the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street after the election and noted that people who have a job do not always have job security. Sadly, the Government have kicked the Taylor review’s recommendations into the long grass, and have failed to take action on areas such as the Swedish derogation, which I sought to address with my private Member’s Bill. Will the Minister commit to take action to ensure more and better workplace inspections to ensure that the scant, bare-minimum protections that workers are currently afforded are actually enforced, and that swift action is taken against abusive employers?

On companies that make profits off the backs of agency workers, will the Minister ensure that, from day one, agency workers are afforded the same rights and pay as permanent staff doing the same roles in the same company? That is another issue that I sought to address in my private Member’s Bill. Cases brought against Uber and Pimlico Plumbers show that such workers are employees; they are not self-employed or independent contractors, as claimed. In view of such cases, will the Government act now, rather than wait for every single worker to undertake judicial proceedings against their employer? Those are not just legal judgments against individual employers, but damning indictments of employers in the gig economy as a whole.

I have heard from an Amazon worker who has seen women colleagues tragicallymiscarry in a warehouse, and fights break out on the packing floor because the competition for work is so high. I have heard the heartbreaking story of a careworker whose employers forced her to provide a urine sample to prove she was too sick to work. Another careworker’s agency refused to give her work as soon as it found out she was pregnant. I have heard from a Hermes worker who gets only one day off a year to spend with his family, which has a damaging effect not just on him but on his wife and children.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend join me in condemning organisations that engage in such practices? One of my constituents ended up with hypothermia after waiting for Deliveroo work. When he was admitted to hospital, he was not offered the sick pay and protection that other employees get. The Government must take action now because although GMB and other unions are doing fantastic work we cannot rely just on unions. We need to ensure that the Government support our unions.

**Stephanie Peacock**: I join my hon. Friend in condemning that. I am sure the Minister is listening carefully.

Those workers are the real face of the gig economy. It is simply not good enough. We urgently need an economy that works for everyone. We need well-paid jobs that offer long-term security and give people the chance not just to get by but to succeed and prosper. We need genuine action that addresses the employment loopholes that unscrupulous employers use to exploit vulnerable workers. Many people in Barnsley and across the UK need action now.

**Steve McCabe** (in the Chair): We have 12 Members who want to speak, so I have to impose a time limit of three minutes. You have to stick to that.

4.55 pm

**Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): I will follow your guidance, Mr McCabe, although I am the only Back-Bench Member represented on the Government Benches. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for securing this important debate.

The 21st century has brought us the advent of digital technologies, which have been transformational to working environments, creating opportunity and flexibility with
remote working and online networking. Unfortunately, there are cases where flexible working models have led to poor management practices and a degradation of employment rights.

Although flexible work has advantages for employers and employees, in some instances insecure work does not provide a fair balance for employees. I have experienced that in my family. A cousin of mine is on a zero-hours contract. He took a shift with a well-known retailer, but on arrival was told he was only needed for two hours, leaving him with a day’s wages that barely covered the bus fare to and from work. That is not uncommon, and it can be worse: people can turn up for work and find that there is no work for them. There is no excuse for that; it is just bad management practice. Employers can plan how many people they need before somebody turns up for work. Those situations can sometimes be facilitated by working arrangements in the gig economy, but that is not the case for most workers.

A study carried out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy identified that the most common use for this type of employment was to supplement income streams, with approximately two thirds of those who took part in the study earning less than 5% of their income with gig work. It was basically topping up income. Even in today’s world, it is normally women who take time off to care for loved ones, and the gig economy can provide a great way for women to continue to work while balancing their responsibilities. I am sure we all have many examples of that. I have one in my constituency. Through an online platform, a constituent does administrative jobs for 20 hours a week while her son is at preschool or when he is watching the football with her husband. I guess we are hoping that she will be here with us.

The use of flexible work to bolster household income is increasingly common. Some people choose that way of working permanently. Technology has enabled capabilities to take off as the world gets smaller, in terms of connectivity. One of my constituents, a recent graduate, currently works as a freelance online comms manager. He runs social media accounts from home, servicing the needs of companies. The work is insecure, because it is not contracted, but he values the flexibility. He is not alone; some 90% of those who are wholly reliant on gig income said that they were satisfied. Of course, we need to listen to the concerns of the 10%, some of which have been expressed here today.

The gig economy can empower people to live in a way that increases choice, allowing them to balance their commitments. That will become increasingly important as we all work for longer and will require greater flexibility in how we manage our careers.

4.58 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this important debate and the powerful way in which she introduced the subject.

The world of work is evolving rapidly. The plethora of court cases and the growing uncertainty are a reflection not only of how technology is changing the employment relationship, but of how new and unscrupulous employers are seeing that as an opportunity to loosen the relationship further, usually to the detriment of the worker.

I, too, pay tribute to the GMB, which has pushed back against this wild west frontier approach, but it should not just be down to trade unions to try to make the best of 20th-century laws in the 21st century. Parliament should be setting out a new, comprehensive settlement to take us into the new world. We should do it in a way that ensures dignity, certainty and fairness for those who work in the gig economy. That is why it is completely unacceptable that, weak though it is, there has been no progress on the Taylor review a year after it reported.

I am talking about the 21st century, and I have to say that I was rather amused and disappointed by the comments made by the founder of Pimlico Plumbers.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The important thing is that we are now creating a new animal in our economy: the working poor. That is what people tend to miss, and it is happening as a result of the gig economy. We had an incident in Coventry a fortnight ago on a Saturday night between black cab drivers and Uber drivers, and it ended in a certain amount of violence. Surely, things cannot go on like this.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Whole ways of working are being disrupted in ways that really are undermining the economy. I go back to the Pimlico Plumbers judgment, which found that someone who had worked for the company for six years was entitled to some basic workplace employment rights. The founder of Pimlico Plumbers said:

“We had five judges in the top court in the country and an opportunity to bring our employment law into the 21st century and unfortunately they missed the point.”

I have to say that he has rather missed the point, if he thinks that in the 21st century it is acceptable for someone to work at the same company for six years and not be entitled to any basic workplace protections. That sounds like something out of the 19th century, not the 21st.

I had rather more sympathy with him when he said:

“We can’t get our heads around this word ‘worker’ and what it means.”

I am sympathetic to that, because the truth is that the worker category has always been an unsatisfactory halfway house between employed and self-employed. If we leave aside the question of agency workers, there should be no halfway house—a person is either employed by someone or not. If we can offer a bold and clear legislative framework, with the presumption of employment if someone is carrying out the work personally, we can end the uncertainty and hopefully begin to end the exploitation that we see in the sector.

Those who advocate these new relationships often present them as providing a choice to those who work under them, but it is an utterly false choice. It is a choice that is no choice at all. A choice is ordering food from a menu or choosing to have gammon and deciding whether to have egg or pineapple with it. The choice here is whether someone accepts what is served up or does not eat at all. That is not a real choice. It is a business model based on the premise that in the 21st century it is acceptable for someone or not. If we leave aside the question of agency workers, there should be no halfway house—a person is either employed by someone or not. If we can offer a bold and clear legislative framework, with the presumption of employment if someone is carrying out the work personally, we can end the uncertainty and hopefully begin to end the exploitation that we see in the sector.

Those who advocate these new relationships often present them as providing a choice to those who work under them, but it is an utterly false choice. It is a choice that is no choice at all. A choice is ordering food from a menu or choosing to have gammon and deciding whether to have egg or pineapple with it. The choice here is whether someone accepts what is served up or does not eat at all. That is not a real choice. It is a business model and a culture that says people are as disposable as coffee cups. It says, “If we don’t have enough work, tough. If you fall ill, tough.” And, crucially, it says, “If you question our methods or challenge any of our payments, you should not expect to get any more work from us in the future.”
Without job security, people have no security. How can they plan for the future, look to buy a house, have a family, save for retirement or maybe even start their own business if the labour market is so cutthroat, insecure and parasitic that it takes everything that they have got just to keep their head above the water? I think we can do better than that. We need to enter a new world where people are valued as much as the product that they are producing. At the moment, we are in a world where exploitation is all. It has to come to an end.

5.1 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this debate and on her private Member’s Bill, of which I am a sponsor. I also want to take the opportunity to commend the work of Better Than Zero, an organisation primarily organised through the Scottish Trades Union Congress youth committee, which continues to expose rogue employers in Scotland.

Mr McCabe, you and I sit on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. You will know that there are 4,504 full-time equivalent posts chasing social security fraud estimated at £1.2 billion. There are 400 workers from the state who are employed to chase minimum wage compliance. If the minimum wage compliance unit had 4,504 full-time equivalent posts, I just wonder whether there would be 200,000 workers in the United Kingdom not being paid the national minimum wage.

Another piece of legislation, in addition to the hon. Lady’s, is the Workers (Definitions and Rights) Bill. It is in my name, and it proposes a number of key things as solutions for workers in the gig economy. First, it looks at zero-hour contracts. I think they should only be in place where there is a collective agreement with a recognised trade union. That will be the test of whether the claim that people like zero-hour contracts is actually true or not. Mainly people tell us that people like zero-hour contracts, but I have never met anyone who went to a careers adviser at school and said, “I want wanna yon zero-hour contracts.” It just does not happen.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Has the hon. Gentleman considered alternative contracts such as they have in other countries? In Holland, for instance, they have contracts by agreement, which are fixed-term agreements paid by the hour with a legal route to permanent contracts. Is that something that he would consider in his legislation?

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. Just before the hon. Gentleman replies, I would point out that if people keep taking interventions, some people are going to drop off the end.

Chris Stephens: I am not opposed to what the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) suggests. I want to deal with the important issue of shift changes. Some of us in the Chamber attended a TUC event earlier this year. It is clear that two things are happening: sometimes shifts are cancelled, which means that people miss out and have to pay for childcare, and sometimes people are told they have to work additional hours. There is a real case for saying that if people turn up at work and are told that they have to work additional hours or that their shift is cancelled, they should be paid double time so that they are compensated for childcare.

We must also look at worker status. I have a very real concern about the Taylor review trying to introduce additional tiers of worker. There should be a single definition of a worker. It is clear that if someone provides their labour to an employer, they are a worker—full stop. Self-employment is also easily defined. It seems clear to me that a window cleaner with 200 customers is self-employed. We really need to address the issue with worker status to help the many people who are told that they are self-employed when, in actual fact, that is bogus.

I want to touch finally on an issue that we have seen with Carillion and in other places, such as a Hilton hotel in Scotland, where a hairdresser absconded with £80,000, leaving four workers without a job, and the hotel said, “Not our responsibility.” We need to deal with that issue, too. Where an employer absconds or goes bust, the principal contractor should be responsible for the wages and the terms and conditions of its workers.

I thank you, Mr McCabe, for calling me to speak, and I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley East for securing the debate.

5.6 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As an employment rights lawyer for many years, I have seen time and again how insecure work can blight people’s lives. Between 2006 and 2016, there was a 49.8% increase in self-employment in London. That increase may not, as some claim, indicate an upsurge in entrepreneurial spirit, but it is a symptom of an ever more insecure workforce.

I spent the first part of my career working on holiday pay claims for construction workers. Many worked for the same company day in, day out under the strict control of their boss and without taking any of their own financial risk, but they were routinely told that they were self-employed and therefore not entitled to holiday pay, let alone to notice or protection against unfair dismissal.

Many years later, the issue of bogus self-employment has certainly not gone away, as demonstrated by the claim brought by Uber drivers, which was supported by the GMB. Uber tried to categorise its drivers as self-employed and said that they were not entitled to holiday pay or the national minimum wage, despite the fact that they were subject to Uber’s rules and training, were obliged to accept fares and could be penalised if they accepted a job and then cancelled. In a scathing employment tribunal judgment, those drivers were found to be employees. Time and again, unions and tribunals have stepped in where unscrupulous employers have thought they can get away with it.

Agency work is another area of insecure work that desperately needs reform. The Agency Workers Regulations 2010 brought in limited rights for agency workers—after 12 weeks, they are entitled to the same pay as they would be if they had been hired directly by the company—but there are a number of significant problems with those regulations. A loophole called the Swedish derogation...
means that agency workers can be exempted from equal treatment on pay if they have a permanent contract with the agency and it pays them a minimum amount between jobs. The reality is that agencies simply put workers on one job after another with the same hirer for many years, and that those workers never get equal pay with workers who are directly employed.

Moreover, the regulations do not create a presumption of employment for the hirer. For example, a factory worker who has worked in the same factory for 20 years but is employed via an agency could be dismissed on a whim. As the factory is not deemed to be her employer, she cannot claim unfair dismissal or redundancy against it. Surely that cannot be right.

Although the Taylor review may have been a step in the right direction, it simply did not go far enough. It is time for actions, not words, from the Government. Let us have a presumption of direct employment for agency workers, close the door to bogus self-employment and have better enforcement and tougher penalties for those who flout the law. Let us end the exploitation once and for all.

I am making a point but being careful about what I say, because I know that people need to have some of these things, but I also know that they need protection. That is what this debate is about, and I congratulate the hon. Lady on it. People are struggling, and a way to help is to afford them certainty of hours and ensure that they do not feel forced into overtime for fear of losing their jobs. There is work to be done, and I look to the Minister to outline how we can begin to do that seriously, and to ensure that there is a true balance of mutually beneficial flexibility.

5.11 pm

Siohain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): My constituent James Bloodworth spent six months undercover working for some of the UK’s most notorious organisations for insecure work. His book, “Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain”, is an astonishing insight into the day-to-day reality of such workers.

Amazon was the worst, James said. He had a zero-hours contract and he even faced a disciplinary for days off sick. It is no wonder that 74% of Amazon staff are too scared to go to the toilet in case they fall behind with their productivity targets. To quote: “Each of us carried around with us a hand-held device that tracked our every move as if we were convicts on house arrest.”

Uber was not much better, he said, with constraints even on what can be discussed inside the car and a requirement to accept jobs although it might not be financially beneficial to do so. Likewise his time as a careworker, with relentless targets that left him with mere moments to visit each elderly person on his round. It is no wonder that 47% of careworkers leave their post within a year.

Some people see insecure work as a modern way of flexible working, but the reality is that those in the gig economy do not enjoy the flexibility. Of course, it is not only the workers and their families who lose out; so does the whole community, with the fake self-employed status of gig economy workers costing the taxpayer a staggering £75 million a week in lost tax and benefit payouts. That is equivalent to 20% of this week’s promised budget boost for the NHS by 2023.

The reality is that Jeff Bezos, Will Shu and Charlie Mullins become richer and richer off the back of their insecure employment methods, to the detriment of both staff and society. It is time that the Government stuck up not only for those workers, but for this country.

5.13 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing the debate and on the powerful case that she made. Like me, she came to this place as a union activist and union member of staff. I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Let us be clear about this: insecure work, especially that which is low paid, is a disease in my community. It causes ill health, poverty and low aspirations, and unwittingly or unwittingly we immerse ourselves in it every day. It is
the delivery driver about whom we wonder why they left quite so quickly; that is because of the timeframe in which they are trying to deliver their packages. It is the barista who serves us our coffee in the morning. It is the driver who drops us off after a night out. It is around us, and it is in plain sight.

Recently commissioned Government statistics show that a quarter of workers in the gig economy are paid below the national minimum wage. We would not accept that in any salaried sector. It is a cause of national scandal, and we ought to do something about it. It is right that we, as a Parliament, take an interest in this, but we need our Government to show leadership on it. At the moment we are actually looking to those outside Government to show that leadership, and I make absolutely no apologies for praising the work of our trade unions—of my union GMB, of Unite, of USDAW and of others—in shining a light on this issue, and of my Labour colleagues in trying to make this point. Look how many of us have come for the debate.

Our trade unions, which are the voice of workers across the country, have repeatedly warned that individuals are being pressured into signing away their rights and too often have to accept low pay as a default. Companies use whatever loopholes and grubby shortcuts they need to exploit people’s desperation. We have a responsibility to act, to close those loopholes and to stand up for the employee who, in that moment, simply cannot stand up for themselves.

On the sorts of actions we should ask for, the Trades Union Congress has come up with a helpful list of five wins that would improve matters very quickly and that could be acted on immediately. They are: banning zero-hours contracts, to ensure that workers get guaranteed hours; ensuring equal pay for agency workers by ending the Swedish derogation; cracking down on bogus self-employment and ensuring that those workers enjoy the same basic rights as other employees; allowing trade unions to access all workplaces, to support workers who need representation the most; and increasing resources and powers for enforcement.

Steps such as those, which put workers and people first—including those in my community—are what we need. They are what I want from Parliament and they are what we need our Government to act on.

5.16 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this important debate. The casualisation of the jobs market is nothing new. For decades now this country has been moving from an industrial, export-led economy to a services-led economy. Over that period we have begun to see—at an increasing pace—a race to the bottom in jobs, pay and terms and conditions for working people. That is why the debate is so important.

In my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis, I have raised concerns about the taxi and private hire industry, which other hon. Members have referred to. For anyone in any doubt about the agenda of those companies and the way they treat their workers, look at the way that companies such as Uber have had to be dragged kicking and screaming through the courts by trade unions, on behalf of their members—Uber workers—to be made to provide the basic terms and conditions and decent wages that everyone should enjoy.

I am proud of the role that GMB has played, of my party’s relationship with the trade unions and of the support I have enjoyed as a trade union member and supporter, which is reflected in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. However, people should not have to rely on trade unions or High Court judges to protect their basic rights and terms and conditions; they should have a Government and a legal framework that is on their side, which they clearly do not.

We have heard nonsense about flexibility—about how flexible the gig economy is and how people really enjoy the choice. How many people would choose that flexibility for themselves?

Gillian Keegan: Me and many others.

Wes Streeting: I am happy to give way, but how many Members would choose to earn less than a real living wage or not to receive holiday pay and maternity or paternity pay? The truth is that, when we are looking at the way our economy will change—the next phase of globalisation, and the next phase of the industrial revolution that will change our country—how we protect the value of labour will be one of the single biggest questions that defines our political generation. It is about skills, but fundamentally it is about shaping the economy in the interests of ordinary working people and not allowing tech companies, top-heavy business models or digital platforms to shape it in their interests.

The Taylor review was a wonderful opportunity to answer and to meet some of these big challenges. Matthew Taylor is a great guy with a big brain, but clearly, because of his working for this Government and within the political framework in which he worked, the report would be received, that report was not nearly ambitious enough. If that was not disappointing in and of itself, the fact that we have seen so little action off the back of it tells workers that they cannot rely on this Government to protect their interests. We desperately need a Labour Government that will put their interests and their rights at work front and centre.

5.19 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for securing this important debate. Insecure work and the gig economy are increasingly and rapidly becoming the norm. Indeed, I have spoken to youngsters out there who have never known a full-time, permanent contract or secure hours. Far too often, work in the gig economy comes with the erosion of employment rights—something that those who have worked in the creative industries know only too well. When I worked in television, we used to call ourselves the original gig economy, because just about all the work was casual and just about everyone was self-employed.

I will use my contribution this afternoon to highlight two particular points: maternity rights and pregnancy discrimination. Pregnancy discrimination is something that affects women no matter what type of employment
they are in. The Women and Equalities Committee estimates that 54,000 women a year are dismissed or made redundant, or feel they have no choice but to leave their job, because of pregnancy. That is simply not good enough, but I suspect it is even worse in the gig economy. When the work is insecure and short term, the reality for many women is that once they start showing, they simply will not receive any more contracts. That is something that actors know all too well.

We need to put protections in against that culture becoming more widespread across our economy. I know that in response to the Taylor review, the Government said that they were reviewing maternity legislation, and they committed to updating the advice on the Government website this summer, but the truth is that when it comes to pregnancy discrimination the Taylor review did not go nearly far enough. It does not recommend any concrete change for pregnant women or new mothers. It makes a reference to employment tribunal fees making enforcement of rights difficult, but it does not say that fees should be scrapped. It does not mention access to antenatal care, which is a big problem for many women in casual work.

It does not mention the specific health and safety needs of pregnant women and new mothers in casual forms of work, nor does it deal with their specific concerns about sick pay and qualification for maternity pay. Those issues should all be fundamental rights for all mums.

Moving on to maternity leave and pay, I think we all agree that the introduction of shared parental leave and pay is a big step forward. It is, for those in conventional employment. It is not available for freelancers or the self-employed. That is why I have introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, which would allow mums to share the maternity allowance with their freelance partners. It would cost the Treasury very little, and I know the Treasury seems quite sympathetic toward it. I simply encourage the Minister not to let this issue slip off the radar.

In summary, although I believe the Government should move swiftly to implement elements of the Taylor review, I would encourage them not to limit their thinking. Pregnancy discrimination is rife and by some measures it is getting worse. Freelance mums and dads deserve the flexibility afforded to other families. That is a matter of fairness, so now please let us get on with it.

5.22 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I add my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing the debate.

I will just make three broad points. First, it is extraordinary that the Government have not got a grip on the debate. It are not a marginal issue. One in five workers in this country are now self-employed—a bigger proportion than public service workers. If public service workers in this country were confronting the kinds of conditions and suffering the kinds of stories we heard this afternoon, there would be a national scandal. Why are we not getting to grips with this challenge for the country's self-employed?

If the present day is not bad enough, hon. Members should think about what is to come. Over the next 10 years this economy will be fundamentally transformed by automation. Brexit and the rise of China. Automation alone is likely to destroy five times more working-class jobs than the shutdowns of the coal and steel industries put together. We know that trend is coming; we know what happened when coal and steel were lost to communities across the country in the 1980s. What grew back were the kinds of insecure jobs we are debating now. Let us not make that mistake again. Let us put in place now a regime for good jobs in the years to come.

Secondly, we have to look again at why it is that basic laws, such as the right to trade union organising or the right to the national minimum wage, are not being enforced today. I commend James Bloodworth's book on the scandals we have heard about. I had the honour of meeting him this afternoon. It beggars belief that some of the biggest firms on the planet, such as Amazon, are being caught not paying the national minimum wage. Where is the inspectorate? Where are the prosecutions? Where are the court cases? Is the Minister prepared to tell us what he is doing to ensure that justice is done?

We have had a useful debate this afternoon about the shortcomings of the Taylor review. The economy will inevitably grow in the years to come, so we have to try to equalise definitions of workers. We have to do away with the nonsense of the Swedish derogation and put in place the kind of action plan that the TUC has carefully and thoughtfully developed.

I will leave the Minister with this thought: there is a basic injustice in a marketplace where, over the course of a single morning, James Bloodworth can earn £29 working in an Amazon warehouse but the wealth of Jeff Bezos goes up by $1.4 billion. We had a long tradition in this country of entrepreneurs, such as George Cadbury, William Lever and John Spedan Lewis, who not only built great businesses, but changed society for the better. We need the Government to ensure that the entrepreneurs of today are doing a damn sight better job on that front.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Just before I call the Front-Benchers, the debate is scheduled to finish at 5.51 pm, so there should be enough time for the mover of the motion to make a brief reply, and for the Minister, if he is so minded, to take an intervention or two. That is, obviously, up to him.

5.25 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this timely and important debate.

As we have heard from the contributions this afternoon, a lot of people are rightly concerned about the fate of workers in the gig economy. The hon. Lady talked about the insecure employment of between 1 million and 3 million people, which is an outstanding figure to contemplate. She talked about the balance of power lying with employers, about how unscrupulous companies are using employees, especially in distribution warehouses and the public sector, and tellingly about how there is little future for those trapped in such employment. The £300 million in lost national insurance contributions alone should be of interest to the Government.

I would love to cover everybody who spoke in the debate, but that will not be possible, so I will refer to some hon. Members and not others. However, I thought everybody made a telling contribution. My hon. Friend
the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) rightly commended Better than Zero for the work that it has done and talked about the difference between the 4,504 full-time-equivalent people chasing social security claimants and the 400 workers chasing people regarding employment rights and compliance. I thought the key moment was when he spoke about career advisers not advising anyone to go for a zero-hours-contract career.

My hon. Friend rightly talked about shift cancellations and adjustments and suggested that people should be paid double time in such circumstances. There has to be a consequence if people are turning up at work and finding out that the goal posts have shifted for them unfairly. He also talked about the status of the definition of a worker and the responsibility of the principal contractor.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) was the only Tory MP to speak, which is a telling shame. She rightly said that the gig economy can provide opportunities for people, but as we have noted, flexibility is used too often as an excuse for exploitation. That is not good enough for people.

Hon. Members talked about people without proper jobs, such as those on zero-hours contracts, not having a future and struggling to keep their head above water and about the need to treat people with respect. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) rightly talked about the move from an industrial to a services economy. That was backed up later when one of his colleagues talked about the move to automation. There are real challenges and workers need to be protected. As the hon. Member for Ilford North said, people should not have to rely on trade unions to make those points; they should have those protections.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) rightly talked about women—a subject too often overlooked in detail—and the issues of pregnancy sick pay and maternity leave. Her ten-minute rule Bill sounds eminently sensible. I look forward to seeing the detail, but I am sure that that is something the Government should consider.

The Scottish National party firmly opposes exploitative zero-hours contracts and other types of employment that offer workers little or no job security. Scotland is ahead of the curve in promoting fairer working practices and protecting workers’ rights. Only today, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) sought leave to bring in a Bill for a genuinely representative body for the armed forces. The SNP has led on such matters at Westminster and on tackling exploitative work practices. Too often, when exploitative zero-hours contracts are used, it is said that they will provide flexibility, but the workers simply end up being exploited. Those workers often have too few alternative options. Where that practice occurs, or is likely, there should be a ban.

The Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to become an accredited living wage employer. New guidance has been issued, to ensure that companies that bid for public sector contracts cannot use exploitative zero-hours contracts. Scotland is the best performer of all the four countries in the UK, with the highest proportion of employees paid the living wage or more.

The figure is 81.6%, compared with 78% in England, 75% in Wales and 72% in Northern Ireland. We have more than 1,200 accredited living wage employers in Scotland, paying a minimum of £8.75 an hour, which is the new real living wage.

In 2015, the Scottish Government introduced the Fair Work Convention, so that fair work will be embedded in the workplace by 2025. The Scottish business pledge has signed up 498 companies, including Coca-Cola, Microsoft and Virgin Money, to demonstrate a commitment to fair work, employee engagement and, crucially, productivity. That is where companies can really take the benefit: when workers are treated properly and get a fair wage and conditions, they are far more productive in the workplace. That is demonstrable.

The Scottish Government are developing a fair work charter, to be finalised this year in conjunction with the TUC as a guide for employers and workers who face unexpected events, including severe weather such as the beast from the east, but we could do more. The Smith commission proposed that the administration of 22 reserved tribunals be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, where we could make a further difference, but the UK Government have yet to do that. Those matters cover the underlying substantive rights and duties that remain reserved to this place, so I ask the Minister whether he will now commit to acting on the issue, devolve the remaining powers and allow more protection for Scottish workers?
to their jobs, which is an absolute disgrace. That people are too scared to go to the toilet in this century, never mind any other century, is absolutely terrible.

The Conservatives and the Government boast about the recovery of employment and lower employment figures, but, sadly, for millions of people work means rising insecurity and low pay. Average real pay has still not returned to the level it was before the financial crisis, and the Resolution Foundation predicts that this is likely to be the weakest decade of real pay growth in almost two centuries. We might have high employment, but we also have record poverty among those in work, so a celebration of employment figures alone is completely disingenuous. What are the Government actually celebrating? More than 8 million working people live in poverty. In 2018, that is an absolute disgrace. The Minister celebrates low unemployment but fails to recognise the poor quality of those jobs.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is utterly perverse that many of the people in low-paid insecure work are forced to rely on tax credits? In other words, all of us as taxpayers are funding the exploitative business models of their employers who do not pay their staff proper wages.

**Laura Pidcock:** It is absolutely nonsensical that the state should subsidise inordinate profits on the one hand and very poor pay on the other. The reality of modern work for millions of people, particularly in the north and in places such as North West Durham, is short-termism, insecurity, low pay and fear. Fixed-term contracts, enforced self-employment and agency work signal a move towards a more casualised and fragmented world of work. The use of zero-hours contracts increased rapidly in the wake of the financial crisis, increasing two and a half times between 2012 and 2016. The latest figures available show that that is not abating. We have had an increase from 1.4 million to 1.8 million in just six months.

When Conservative Members celebrate the flexibility—this has been mentioned many times—of zero-hours contracts, they have a romanticised vision of a student who perhaps wants summer work, but the reality is very different. One in three people on a zero-hours contract wants more hours.

**Justin Madders:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Laura Pidcock:** I have very little time; I am sorry.

A whole industry has exploded to formalise and professionalise insecurity at work, including through the use and abuse of new technology. It is absolutely right that we view that as the challenge of our generation. How we meet the challenges of technology replacing management structures with apps essentially being the employer is one of the most pressing issues. We need to take robust legislative action against that.

Despite the Government’s shameful resistance to protecting workers, we saw two landmark cases in the gig economy last week. First, a decision by the Supreme Court in favour of Gary Smith against Pimlico Plumbers, as has been mentioned, established that he was a worker and not self-employed. There must be an immediate end to exploitative employment practices. Last Friday, the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain won its right to pursue its case against Deliveroo, and I wish it luck. I will end by saying that all the evidence shows that the best way to guarantee fair pay and protections at work is by strengthening the voices of workers through our trade unions—I am a member of Unite, so I register that interest—and by enabling the unions to organise and bargain collectively. That is why an incoming Labour Government would bring about a workplace rights revolution and create a new ministry of labour, which is not currently a Department, to give workers and trade unions long overdue rights and protections in law. We will of course repeal the shameless Trade Union Act 2016 and introduce new legislation to roll out sectoral collective bargaining.

**Dan Carden:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Laura Pidcock:** I am so sorry; I cannot. I have gone over my time already, and I want to ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East manages to sum up.

**Andrew Griffiths:** I will give way just once; Members will understand that I am short on time.

**Justin Madders:** It is very generous of the Minister to give way. Obviously, we have heard a lot about flexibility, but if someone is reliant on these employers to give them work, does he think that the landlord will be flexible in getting the rent for that month?
Andrew Griffiths: I completely understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. That is why we have recognised that those opportunities come with risks, and that some in the workforce need greater protections.

The UK’s flexible, dynamic labour market has allowed the economy to bounce back from Labour’s recession and has delivered record employment; unemployment is at the lowest rates for 40 years. However, we recognise that it has not worked for all. It was for that reason that Matthew Taylor was asked by this Government to examine the current labour market and employment law framework, to help us to understand the opportunities of future working practices as well as to identify areas where the labour market was not working for everyone.

That is why in February the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made a commitment in the industrial strategy to take responsibility for the quality of work, which was the first time ever that a Government focused on quality as well as quantity of work. Our aim is to drive forward the change required to ensure that creating quality of work is given equal priority to the quantity of work that is created.

Our detailed response to the Taylor review was published on 7 February. In that response, we committed to take forward 52 of the 53 recommendations. Our response clearly demonstrates that we are progressing with our commitment to take firm action to protect the most vulnerable, the lowest paid and those who work in a non-traditional way.

For example, we have consulted on state enforcement to ensure that vulnerable workers get their holiday and sick pay; we have asked the Low Pay Commission to consider higher minimum wage rates for workers on zero-hours contracts; we are providing all 1.2 million agency workers with a clear breakdown of who pays them, and of any costs or charges that are deducted from their wages; we are ensuring that all workers get an up-front statement of terms and conditions from day one; we are making it easier for flexible workers to accrue employment rights, by extending the permissible breaks in continuous service; and we are creating a right to request a stable contract for all workers. To progress that work, we have very recently completed four consultations on employment status, agency workers, transparency and enforcement, which are necessary to deliver the change that this Government wish to see.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East asked whether we would give workers the same equal pay rights as other employees. The Government do not support or condone the use of Swedish derogation contracts to circumvent equal pay entitlements. Let me be absolutely clear on that. That is why we have consulted to gather views and evidence on our response. Options include repeal or regulation in relation to the use of the Swedish derogation. Before taking a final decision, it is right that we consider the views coming forward properly in that consultation.

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) accused the Government of ruthless whipping. As a former Whip, I take great exception to that. She raised the issue of zero-hours contracts, but the number of people reporting that they are employed on a zero-hours contract is down from 905,000 last year to 901,000. Some 6% of businesses use some form of a zero-hours contract. There are 1.7 million temporary workers in the UK, but 28.4% of them said that they did not want a permanent job.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) made a magnificent speech, and pointed out the challenges and the opportunities of the gig economy. She rightly said that 90% of gig economy workers are satisfied with the jobs they are doing.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), in his usual determined manner, said that there should be more people enforcing the minimum wage. I am delighted to tell him that the Government have continued to invest heavily in minimum wage enforcement. We have doubled the budget to £26.3 million, up from £13 million last year. As a result, we secured £15.6 million in arrears last year, covering 200,000 workers in this country who had redress thanks to the Government’s support.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister confirm that 25% of the posts at the national minimum wage compliance unit are still lying vacant?

Andrew Griffiths: I do not think that is right. I will write to the hon. Gentleman, but I assure him that those figures are wrong.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) asked what the Government had done about pregnancy and maternity discrimination—a subject that is dear to my heart and that of the hon. Member for North West Durham. In response to Taylor, we are working to improve the guidance and advice on pregnancy and maternity rights and employers’ obligations. We also committed to review redundancy protection within the next 12 months. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen asked about shared parental leave for self-employed people. As she recognises, it is under review. I cannot commit to that today, but once again she makes that point loud and clear.

The Taylor review considered not only the plight of agency workers, which many hon. Members raised. In his 2018-19 strategy, the director of labour market enforcement published recommendations to support those workers. In response to Matthew Taylor’s recommendations on agency workers, the Government have already committed to take action and improve transparency on pay and on the rate workers will receive on taking up assignments. Quite simply, it is not right that individuals do not receive the advertised rate of pay.

I have mentioned the issue of the Swedish derogation. We are also considering extending the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate’s remit better to protect agency workers from emerging challenges in the labour market. We are looking at whether it should include umbrella companies, about which we all have concerns. I am sure the hon. Member for Barnsley East understands that I cannot pre-empt the results of the Taylor consultation. It is clear that Members on both sides of the House agree that agency workers’ employment rights need special consideration and protection.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the UK is a great place not just to grow a business, but to work. We understand that being employed is not enough if the employee is at risk of being exploited or mistreated.
by their employer. We have consulted on options for what would be the most radical shake-up of our employment law in decades and we will take the necessary action to protect workers across the United Kingdom.

5.48 pm

Stephanie Peacock: I begin by thanking you, Mr McCabe, as well as the Minister, the SNP spokesperson and especially the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock)—I believe this is her final debate, so I wish her well in her maternity leave—for their contributions. Most importantly, I thank all hon. Members from across the House. We have seen in all the contributions just how insecure and precarious work is affecting our constituents.

As was rightly pointed out, the Opposition make no apology for trade unions being the voice of working people. I pay tribute to my union, the GMB, and all trade unions campaigning on this issue. A number of examples were given of the work they do, and in particular the simple steps put forward by the TUC that could tackle the problem.

We heard many appalling examples of the treatment of workers by a number of companies and the devastating impact of that on workers’ health. There were examples of exploitation of working practices, the impact of automation and the truly shocking level of in-work poverty, which is an absolute scandal. All that testimony combined to form a truly damming portrait of the lives of workers with insecure employment. It is a picture of people trapped in low-paid work who are treated without dignity or respect by their employers, who exploit short-term working practices to maximise their profit at the expense of their workers’ security. Some are driven into debt, struggling to buy food or pay bills; others into ill health. It is not good enough.

For all the Minister’s statistics, we need action, and we need it now. The Government must act now to end exploitative working practices, provide an economy that works for everyone and ensure that hard-working people in Barnsley and across the UK are provided with the long-term secure employment they desperately need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered insecure work and the gig economy.

5.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.
ME: Treatment and Research

1.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered myalgic encephalomyelitis treatment and research.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving Members the opportunity to hold this debate.

It is estimated that around a quarter of a million people in the UK suffer from myalgic encephalomyelitis—ME. It costs the UK around £3.3 billion per annum. Although the exact cause of the disease is unknown, numerous patients report that their ME developed following a viral infection. ME is characterised by flu-like symptoms that can vary in severity from headaches and muscle aches to debilitating pain, extreme sensitivity to light and sound, and memory and concentration problems. For some, even touch is intolerable and they require tube feeding. Despite the number of people affected, ME. It is a tragic situation when children are not able to attend school and social services become involved because they consider there to be a problem with those children’s care.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is quite right that doctors do not research this enough and do not have adequate training to suss it out, for want of a better term. More importantly, less than 1% of children are badly affected. Does she agree that, very often, employers do not understand the illness?

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman is entirely with the hon. Lady. It is a tragic situation when children are not able to attend school and social services become involved because they consider there to be a problem with those children’s care.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is particularly difficult for those who attend benefits assessments on a day when the symptoms are not as bad, because there is no acceptance that the illness can be very bad on some days, but not quite as bad on other days. Does the hon. Lady agree the benefits system must look at the longer term picture, rather than the short term?

Carol Monaghan: I will come on to interactions with the Department for Work and Pensions. ME patients report that energy levels vary. Sometimes, going to such an appointment can wipe out someone for many weeks afterwards. If that person were to attend the appointment the following day, their condition would be very different.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am delighted that the hon. Lady has secured this debate. She referred to the seriousness of ME and how many people are affected. Does she agree that for it to be taken seriously and proportionately to its scale and impact, that needs to be reflected in every area, including the amount of medical research that is devoted to ME? It is certainly a point that my constituents are concerned should be raised in this debate.

Carol Monaghan: ME receives practically no biomedical research funding, which I will come back to. Because of the misunderstanding of the condition, the treatments available are often more damaging to the person than no treatment at all.

Merryn Crofts was just 15 when she experienced hives and swelling in her joints after a family holiday in Majorca. Tests revealed that she had contracted glandular fever. Despite dozens of medical appointments, Merryn’s condition deteriorated; she suffered breathing problems, exhaustion and excruciating hypersensitivity to touch, light and sound. She was eventually diagnosed with ME. This once bright young woman was forced to wear an eye mask and suffered from severe migraines, brain fog, slurred speech and persistent infections. Stomach problems and difficulties swallowing meant that her weight plummeted to just 5½ stone. Merryn was eventually fitted with an intravenous nutrition line but was given a terminal diagnosis in 2016. Merryn wrote in her blog: „Having severe ME, is like being trapped in your own body every single day. There is no rest, you are bedbound all day every day. It snatches the most simple things away from you like being able to wash yourself, even in bed. Being cared for in every way possible. In terrible pain, from everything. Not being able to talk on the phone or have visitors, and feeling worse about saying no every time someone asks again. Months and months in hospital. Severe infections. Breathing problems. Low immunity. Problems anywhere and everywhere in the body. Paralysis. Severe hypersensitivity. The list is endless, and if I was physically able to type I would carry on. Spread awareness and remember all of us and all of those who have lost their lives.”

Merryn died on 23 May 2017, just days after her 21st birthday.

Why is the treatment for people with ME so poor? The lack of understanding shown by some healthcare professionals of a person’s suffering is one of the greatest frustrations to the ME community. Much of that stemmed from the publication of the controversial PACE trial. The treatments investigated in the PACE trial were based on the hypothesis that ME patients harbour “unhelpful” convictions about having a disease and that the continuation of their symptoms is the result of deconditioning.

The PACE trial compared different treatments, including cognitive behaviour therapy—CBT—and graded exercise therapy, or GET. The results that were published in The Lancet in 2011 seemed to show that GET and CBT could bring about some improvements in a person with ME. Although that may seem positive, if we dig a little deeper we discover that the parameters for recovery were changed midway through the trial and the results depended on self-reporting. Patients have told me that they were pressurised to describe improvements they really did not feel. One participant in the original trial said:

“After repeatedly being asked how severe...my symptoms were...I started to feel like I had to put a...positive spin on my...answers. I could not be honest about just how bad it was, as that would...tell the doctors I wasn’t trying and I wasn’t being positive enough.”

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech and is drawing attention to this much misunderstood but very serious condition.
My constituents will be grateful to her for that. She made some powerful comments on the PACE trial; will she comment on the way that NICE guidelines have an impact on how the condition is viewed?

Carol Monaghan: I will come on to the NICE guidelines. They are under review, and all politicians can help with that. I have already written to NICE about the issue and I will ask the Minister about that later.

We now know that 13% of the participants in the PACE trial qualified at baseline as “recovered” or “within the normal range” for one of the study’s two primary measures—self-reported physical function—even though they were classified on the same measure as disabled enough to enter the study. That anomaly, which occurred because the investigators weakened key outcome thresholds after data collection, invalidates any claim that patients recovered or got back to normal. The overlap in entry and outcome criteria is only one of the trial’s unacceptable features.

For patients, the impact of PACE is severe. The recommendation of GET as a treatment for ME has provoked a backlash from patient groups, who report that many people with ME end up more severely disabled after a course of GET than before. I have spoken to people living with ME who have tried to do GET after a course of GET than before. I have spoken to many people with ME who have tried to do GET because they are so desperate to get better and have ended up in a wheelchair or bedbound as a result of this programme.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The turnout shows the significance of this issue to all our constituents. Her point about GET is important. It seems perverse that people should be forced to take a course of treatment that patently makes their condition worse. Does she agree that that must be reviewed?

Carol Monaghan: Indeed. Many people have written to me about their experience of GET, but some of the most upsetting examples are of children who were forced through a programme of GET and ended up in a wheelchair or bedbound as a result of this programme.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. Merryn Crofts, whom I will speak about later, Merryn’s mum, Clare, said to me that Merryn was put on GET and that it made her condition worse. Everything that the hon. Lady says is backed up by the testimony that Clare gave me—I just wanted to share that with her.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Merryn’s is not an isolated case, and neither are those of my constituents—I am sure that Members present have all heard constituents describe the same situation.

The PACE trial, which recommended CBT and GET, influences how health insurers and the DWP make their decisions. Insurance companies refuse to pay out unless a programme of GET has been undertaken, and many people who apply for benefits are told that they must carry out GET—or, indeed, that they appear well enough to work. PACE is unique in UK medical history, in that it was part-funded by the DWP. The links of some of its main authors to health insurance companies are troubling. One of those authors, Professor Michael Sharpe, states in his briefing for the debate:

“Several of the investigators had done small amounts of independent consultancy for insurance companies, but this was not relevant to the trial. The insurance companies played no part in the trial.”

I will leave hon. Members to make up their own minds about that.

Healthcare professionals worldwide are starting to take note. The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the Health Council of the Netherlands have both abandoned GET. If those countries acknowledge the flaws of GET, why are ME sufferers in the UK having to fight so hard for similar acknowledgement? The ME community hopes that GET will not feature in the NICE guidelines for ME treatment after they are revised.

Some argue that CBT is provided as a treatment for many illnesses, including heart disease and cancer, and that ME patients’ rejection of it is irrational. The key difference is that cancer patients receive biomedical treatment in addition to CBT, rather than having CBT to the exclusion of biomedical interventions. Biomedical treatment for ME is woefully lacking. There are reports from the US that certain antiviral drugs improve the condition, but without properly funded research to identify biomarkers for ME, we do not have the answers.

Diagnosis is currently based on a patient presenting with known symptoms. Although there is no biomarker for ME, that does not mean there is no biomedical test for it. The two-day cardiopulmonary exercise test, which can objectively document the effects of exercise, could be used as a diagnostic tool. In simple terms, people with ME perform adequately or even well on the first day but have reduced heart and lung function on the second. That relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) about the DWP and the fact that someone’s presentation may be good one day but not the next.

That protocol involves two identical tests separated by 24 hours, the collection of gas exchange data and the use of an exercise bike to measure work output accurately. That type of testing reveals a significant performance decrease on day two among people with ME, in terms of their workload and the volume of oxygen they consume before and during exercise. Results from a single test may be interpreted as deconditioning, which may lead to harmful exercise being prescribed. However, the objective measurements of the two-day test remove the issues of self-reporting bias and the question of effort—in other words, the results cannot be faked.

Those results support the strong and consistent patient evidence of the harm that can occur as a result of inappropriate exercise programmes. However, there are moves afoot to categorise ME as a psychological condition. NHS guidelines on medically unexplained symptoms class ME as such a condition. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states:

“Medically unexplained symptoms are ‘persistent bodily complaints for which adequate examination does not reveal sufficient explanatory structural or other specified pathology.’”

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I just want to pick up on the hon. Lady’s point about ME being classified as a psychological condition. Does
she agree that that is a little curious, given that the World Health Organisation states in its “International Classification of Diseases” that ME is a neurological condition? My understanding is that the United Kingdom is legally obliged to follow that classification.

**Carol Monaghan:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Worryingly, the WHO is looking at reclassifying ME, too—we should all be aware of that—and its current classification of ME as a neurological condition has been ignored in terms of the treatment we have offered to patients here in the UK.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists goes on to state that symptoms are “not due to a physical illness in the body. However, they can be explained, but to do this, we need to think about causes that are not just physical.”

Under the new “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies” guidance for people with long-term conditions, patients who present with ME are classified as people with medically unexplained symptoms who should undergo CBT therapy, in conjunction with other treatments—in other words, graded exercise therapy. However, as ME is classified as a psychological condition, patients risk getting trapped in the psychological care pathway.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): I am co-chair of the all-party group on Lyme disease. Does the hon. Lady agree that there are many similarities between Lyme disease and ME, in that patients may be misdiagnosed and may not know where to turn, and that we need to invest in research in both those important areas?

**Carol Monaghan:** There are many conditions that we now think could be grouped under the wide umbrella of autoimmune conditions. Lyme disease, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and ME may all be in that group, but without research we do not know.

Some people consider ME to be a psychological condition, despite the fact that people with ME are not allowed to be blood or organ donors. Unfortunately, those who hold such beliefs often are in influential positions and have a blinkered view of the condition. I wonder what they have to fear from proper biomedical research into ME. If such research showed they were correct, their views would be vindicated. However, if it threw up new information that had an impact on ME treatment and care, as medical professionals they should surely support that.

**Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Is she aware that the UK charity Invest in ME Research recently opened a centre of excellence for ME research here in the UK? That was funded by patients and carers, who raised a staggering £800,000 for what will be groundbreaking, world-class research.

**Carol Monaghan:** I was not aware of that specific centre, but I am aware that almost all the biomedical research currently taking place in the UK is funded by charities and patient groups, rather than by the Government or research councils.

Interestingly, Professor Sharpe, one of the authors of the PACE trial whom I already mentioned, emailed me this week and told me that my behaviour is “unbecoming of an MP”. I say to Professor Sharpe that if listening to my constituents, investigating their concerns and taking action as a result is “unbecoming”, I stand guilty. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] If Members of Parliament are not willing to stand up for the most vulnerable in society, what hope do any of us have?

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an exceptionally good point about this whole challenge, and the number of Members in the Chamber is testimony to her leading an exceptional debate. Many of my constituents have written to me about this issue. Is the thrust not that the ME community needs to be listened to more broadly in the review by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence?

**Carol Monaghan:** NICE has said that it will review its guidelines and talk to patient groups and ME charities in doing that. We must continue to urge it to ensure that that is the case, because those best placed to talk about the impact of the current guidelines and what should be in future guidelines are those living with ME.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Should not graded exercise therapy be removed as a treatment option even before the NICE guidelines are reviewed, given the evidence that people are being harmed by it? The Minister is hearing that evidence today. Is there not a possibility that in future a court could compensate ME sufferers if they continue to be prescribed GET, given that we, the Minister and medical professionals know the evidence?

**Carol Monaghan:** One of the big issues we have is the real lack of awareness among many in the healthcare profession. I do not want to criticise people in healthcare, and in particular GPs, who have to cover many different conditions, but that highlights why GP education and ME awareness must be increased. It is not an uncommon condition, so we really need to look at that.

What do we need to do now? First, we need properly funded biomedical research into the causes of ME and the treatment of those with ME. I recently asked a series of written questions about the level of funding into biomedical research, and frankly the answers did not fill me with confidence. Less than £1 is spent annually on each ME patient in the UK. It gets worse, because the response states that that was not solely Government funding but, as has been mentioned, from a combination of funders including many ME charities.

The Scottish Government have just announced £90,000 a combination of funders including many ME charities. The Scottish Government have just announced £90,000 for a PhD studentship to support research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment of ME.

The Minister is hearing that evidence today. Is there not a possibility that in future a court could compensate ME sufferers if they continue to be prescribed GET, given that we, the Minister and medical professionals know the evidence?
Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that new guidelines are drawn up for dealing with people with ME. What progress has been made on that? Most importantly, will the Minister support proper funding for biomedical research into the diagnosis and treatment of ME? I understand that money is not usually ring-fenced for particular conditions, but, considering how poorly funded biomedical ME research has been up to now, what steps will the Government take to address that?

I thank all hon. Members who have delayed returning to their constituencies to speak up for those with ME. Their support is appreciated and welcomed by those here today, and by the wider ME community. I also thank the ME charities and campaigners who have briefed us all so thoroughly, and the Countess of Mar for her relentless campaign for improved treatments for ME.

ME is a condition that it is all too easy for us to ignore. Those afflicted by it are often unseen by society, but many hon. Members are in the Chamber because they have been approached by affected constituents. I thank all of those who have brought the condition to our attention. ME has a devastating impact not just on its 250,000 sufferers but on families and carers, too—it has a far wider impact. Ultimately, as politicians we must remember that statistics are simply patients with the tears wiped away.

1.56 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing the debate and all hon. Members who will participate in it. It is essential that we speak for the millions missing, and it is great to see so many people in the Public Gallery.

What I find so shocking is that scientists seem not to want to have the debate. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members across the House find it shocking that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West was written to by a scientist and called out. I have seen scientists writing in journals such as the Journal of Health Psychology calling out the PACE trial, so the idea that the scientists who produced that work have gone unchallenged by other scientists is simply not true. A huge amount of evidence from eminent people in the science community questions the PACE trials, including the methodology, the evidence they used and how they treated their patients, as the hon. Lady said. Therefore, it has been proven not to be the case that the NICE guidelines, built on that questionable evidence, are the only way in which we should consider this disease, and she did that well in a previous debate.

It is great that the NICE guidelines are to be reviewed, but my concern is that that will take some time. I am sure that is the right process; we must get it right and ensure that the voices of ME sufferers are heard. Scoping working groups have been set up in which ME sufferers have been able to participate, and that is welcome. But I find it quite scary that the current guidelines will be in place until October 2020. I have listened to my constituents and read about those of other right hon. and hon. Members who feel that if they are prescribed according to those guidelines and go through all that, it makes them more ill. Far from helping them, it makes them deteriorate. Indeed, I have a constituent who feels that the programme she was put through set her back two or three years.

Real harm is being caused by some of the therapies recommended in the guidelines. If that is the evidence from ME sufferers—I am not a scientist, but from what I have read, that experience is widely shared—it is up to the Minister, working with the chief medical officer and others, to question whether the NICE guidelines should be suspended, at least with respect to GET. If GPs, perhaps because they have not been trained, are making medical prescriptions for treatment following NICE guidelines because Ministers and the chief medical officer have not acted, if that treatment is harming people, and if that continues until October 2020 there will, as I said in my intervention, be a case for those who are harmed to go to court and seek compensation.

No one wants that. To avoid it, surely there must be a way in which Government Ministers, working with NICE and the CMO, can issue guidelines directly to GPs and medical professionals to say, “Be careful before you prescribe GET. Ensure that you have read the evidence. Ensure that you have talked properly to the patient.” With many drugs and pharmaceuticals, there are sometimes side effects. Therapy does not work for everybody. Where is the warning in the NICE guidelines of the side effects of GET? That is serious, because people could be seriously hurt in the period between now and the conclusion of the NICE review.

I will move on to research. Looking at the work that Invest in ME Research has done, for example, setting out the calls for research in this country over two decades or more, I find it quite disturbing that those calls have been ignored. Only charities have enabled a meagre amount of research to be done. Some £5 million was set aside for the PACE trial; if we could have a small amount of that money to start real, biomedical research into ME, we would be making a step forward.

Andrew Selous: Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that, as I understand it, there are roughly two and a half times more people with ME than with multiple sclerosis, yet there is 20 times more research on multiple sclerosis than on ME and, of what little ME research there has been, the vast majority has been through psychological and behavioural studies rather than the biomedical approach?

Sir Edward Davey: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern. I should say that we still need a lot of research into MS, so it is not one or the other, but given the incidence of ME, as he rightly says, the case for research into the biomedical aspects is strong. Invest in ME Research makes a number of proposals in its recent report. For example, it proposes a ring-fenced fund of £20 million a year for the next five years for biomedical research. That recommendation comes from a detailed report; it is not just plucked out of the air. That sort of figure would show that the Government mean business.

I am aware that Ministers cannot stand up at the Dispatch Box and say, “Yes, of course we will direct research money into this probe; I myself will do it.” I am not suggesting the Minister can do that today. I know he cannot. He has to work with research councils...
and others to direct the research. I am also aware that if researchers do not make proposals, sometimes research moneys cannot be granted.

Sir Henry Bellingham: As I mentioned earlier, Invest in ME Research has set up a centre of excellence for research in the Norwich Research Park, and it is planning to create a hub for European biomedical research, which is good news indeed. It already has five PhD students and is hoping to push out a consultant-led clinical service. Here we have the infrastructure and base for that extra Government funding, to build on the money that has been raised by patients and carers.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and it is good that he is here to champion that centre. He makes the point I wish to make to the Minister: a pipeline of research proposals is likely to come about not only from the centre in Norwich, but with no doubt as offshoots from research elsewhere—particularly the United States, which is beginning to get its act together on the research side. There is a pipeline, and I urge the Minister to anticipate that, to talk to the research councils and to say with his colleagues, “We will be ready and we will have the funds ready so that when the research proposals come through”—as I am confident they will—“we will back them.” Then we can start making progress. I say to the Minister, please, not to wait to see whether they come through before he dedicates the money and starts pressurising the research councils, because we know that process can take too long. People have already waited too long.

I will conclude my remarks by underlining two points touched on by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. The first is the need for respect for patients. Sometimes it seems, from the stories I have read, that some in the medical profession—I say some—do not respect patients. They make comments that it is all in people’s minds and that they are making it up. That is no way to talk to adults. A constituent of mine who has been suffering from ME, who I talked to last night, recently went to see her consultant. The consultant said in terms, “All ME people are crazy, except you.” That did not make her feel very happy. I am afraid that type of view among senior medical people is not acceptable, and I hope Ministers will make it clear that they expect patients not to be treated like that.

That links to my final point, on the need to train doctors. We need better guidance and better training so they understand that situation. In that light, I am worried that we are seeing some pressure to reclassify ME. That is sending a dangerous signal, and I hope the Minister will say that the Government are questioning that reclassification and putting it on hold. Otherwise, the training for doctors will not happen, the respect for patients will not happen and we will not see the change that our constituents demand. I look forward to the Minister’s remarks and to the contributions of other hon. Members.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): As a lot of colleagues wish to speak in the debate, I ask that everyone keep their remarks within about eight or 10 minutes each, if that is possible. For the benefit of the Minister and the Opposition spokesmen, I hope to be able to start the winding-up speeches at 4 o’clock.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to contribute so early in this debate. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) were right to say that the number of hon. Members here in this Chamber shows the importance of this subject; I pay full tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West for bringing this debate.

I am particularly pleased to contribute to this debate as a patron of the Dorset ME Support Group, to set out some of the work the group does and to give a brief insight into the lives of two ME sufferers in my constituency. Dorset ME Support Group’s chairman, Peter Bennett, has been hugely helpful in setting out the challenges that ME sufferers face in Dorset. Much of the knowledge the group has comes from the work done in our community in Dorset. There are nearly 400 members, not just in my constituency, but spread across the whole county, and the group provides practical support to its members and their friends and families.

I will highlight three ways that that practical support is given. First, there are local link groups, offering informal venues for members to meet and socialise. Secondly, there is an annual medical lecture. Thirdly, there is telephone support and personal one-to-one support from a self-care co-ordinator. The group’s activity is quite a feat, given that the charity was set up in 1983 and relies on only two part-time employees, as well as a number of volunteers. Needless to say, more volunteers and trustees would be welcome, so if any residents of Dorset are following our proceedings and would like to get involved, I invite them to get in touch. I am sure the Minister and all hon. Members in the Chamber would wish to join me in congratulating Dorset ME Support Group and Peter, as well as the many other support groups that exist across the country.

I will briefly highlight two constituents’ stories about their journey with ME and how it has affected them and the people around them. The first comes from Megan, who is still at school and has detailed to me the impact of ME on her education and quality of life. The following extract sets out the huge challenges she faces daily as a young person with ME, and it speaks to the lack of independence or control over their lives that some sufferers face. She says:

“[I] suffer with ME and it has a huge impact on my education. My grades have dropped far below where they should be and I am just not very happy at school in general. As a result of my ME, I suffer with low mood and some anxiety more recently. I have had ME for about 18 months now.”

Megan encouraged me to attend the debate, saying “it would educate you so much on the struggles me and many others face in everyday life.”

I thank her very much for that encouragement and for taking the time to travel to London today to witness our proceedings this afternoon.

One specific point I would like the Minister to consider is the raising of awareness of support groups—not just in Dorset but across the whole country. Megan made the very good point that the Dorset ME Support Group was not recommended to her or her family by any medical professional; they had to search it out for themselves. She says of that group:
I will try to avoid the points made by other Members, but I make no apologies for going through some of the points made to me by Dr Shepherd. I also mention Sarah Reed—the wife of Andy Reed, the former Member for Loughborough—who has for a long period of time also suffered from ME and has been in touch with me about it on many occasions.

On medical education, it is quite clear that GPs, in particular, have no experience in how to diagnose this disease, so there is a need for training at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to make sure that doctors become more aware of what the condition looks like and the ways in which they could begin to treat it. That continuing lack of medical education adds to the misery that our constituents have faced. Dare I say it, it behoves the Minister—I know he will be tied in what he can say—to say something about the training programmes that we should expect our doctors to go through. It is vital that ME is understood not only by junior doctors but all the way up through the profession. We have understood, from some of the arguments on research, that there are still those who are not necessarily as keenly aware of ME.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is about awareness not only among doctors but among teachers, employers and the wider community? The lack of knowledge in those sectors exacerbates the conditions that those with ME suffer from, and that causes great distress.

Dr Drew: I agree, and the hon. Lady makes her point strongly. All I will say is that I will concentrate mainly on the medical side of things. However, everybody needs to be more aware because of the numbers—two in every 1,000 people are thought to suffer from the condition.

We have heard a lot about the PACE trial and the need for NICE to rewrite its guidelines, so I do not really want to labour those points, other than to say that it is not helpful that cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy are still suggested as the appropriate way forward after ME diagnosis. We know for all sorts of reasons that that is not so. I am sure the Minister heard that and will want to comment on it.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent was diagnosed with ME but, after going for a private test, it turned out to be Lyme disease. That shows the lack of knowledge and the confusion in the medical profession between those two conditions and others.

Dr Drew: If my hon. Friend reads Dr Shepherd’s book, he will see some of the overlap between Lyme disease and ME, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned. That is why this whole area needs proper diagnosis and a proper investigation into some of the research implications.

On research, as has been made patently clear by other Members, most of the research is self-help. That is not good enough. This is a major condition that affects lots of our constituents, and yet they are asked to raise all the money for research themselves. That is not good enough, so we clearly ask the Government—as the Minister will have heard—and the research councils to give ME the priority that it deserves.
Sir Henry Bellingham: I hope the hon. Gentleman will support my campaign to get the Government to invest in the National Institute of Health in America, where other groundbreaking research is being done. The Government should support and invest in success.

Dr Drew: I think that was aimed more at the Minister than me, but I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I gather that the National Institutes of Health in America has begun to grapple with this and to put some quite serious funding into it. ME is an international condition, so we should hope that the Medical Research Council is also able to provide that level of support.

We have heard about the impact of ME on people who go for benefits interviews with the Department for Work and Pensions. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned, it is difficult to get those who judge people's conditions to understand how variable ME is. When people are going for employment and support allowance, personal independence payment or, as has been the case more recently, universal credit, account needs to be taken, when practitioners are making decisions, of the fact that the condition is variable. Sadly, all the evidence is that that is not fully understood. Again, this matter is not the Minister’s responsibility, because it overlaps with the remit of the DWP, but I hope that he can take away from what has been said here today the fact that the DWP needs to be much more aware of what the condition entails, rather than making judgments on what they see the person performing in front of them.

I think that the most important point of all is that we all could put pressure on our local clinical commissioning groups to show greater recognition of how important it is that they fund ME, in terms of both support for the individual patient and looking at how they commission the moneys that go into the services. Clearly, this remains a Cinderella subject, but given the numbers affected and the misery suffered by people with the condition, that is not in any way acceptable, so I hope that as a result of today, the Minister will hear this—we might all be able to go out and talk to our CCGs about what evidence they can provide us with to show that they are properly funding treatment of this condition. As we all know, what has happened in the past has been totally unacceptable. Let us hope that there is a better world now and that we can all play our part in ensuring that this condition is treated with the seriousness that it deserves.

2.21 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who has shown great stamina in fighting for this cause and who set out the position at the outset of the debate with great detail and authority. I therefore do not want to repeat what she said, but will just make a few points.

I said in the application for the debate that the reason why I thought we needed to have it was that ME has terrible PR. That was a slightly flippant thing to say, but the real point I wanted to make was that it is a forgotten illness—and I think it is forgotten for two reasons. The first is that the symptoms are relatively intangible, and the second is that they condition has been disparagingly referred to in the past by a name that has stuck. The hon. Lady referred to it—young flu. It is important that we debate this condition today, not because there are not other illnesses out there—of course there are—but because the sufferers, some of whom we see in the Public Gallery, have been voiceless too long and it is for Parliament to give them their voice.

I want to take this opportunity to thank three remarkable ladies in my constituency: Louise Beaton, Linda Hending and Rachel Ephgrave. With their courage, dignity and stamina, they have educated me and given me the opportunity to speak on their behalf. With that opportunity, let me begin by slaying some myths. The first myth is that of young flu. ME is a thing. The US Institute of Medicine published in 2015 a report that analysed more than 9,000 scientific articles about ME. What did it conclude? It stated:

“The primary message of this report is that ME/CFS is a serious, chronic, complex, multisystem disease”.

In addition, as we have heard, the World Health Organisation has categorised it as a neurological condition in paragraph G93.3. Let the message go out today to those people who may have a dim awareness of ME that it is a condition; it is recognised as a condition; and it deserves to be treated as a condition.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West has already referred to the impacts of the condition. I will not repeat those points, other than to note this. When we talk about its affecting an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK, that is important because it allows us to put it in context with other conditions and the way they are treated. For example, there are 11,000 or so new cases of brain tumours each year, according to Cancer Research UK. The late and much missed Baroness Tessa Jowell did a brilliant job of encouraging the Government to fund additional research into brain cancer, and none of us, least of all anyone in the Public Gallery, would begrudge that a penny, but £40-odd million has gone into that and it is right to note that the number of ME sufferers in the UK is considerably more than 11,000.

I also want to slay the myth about the kinds of people who suffer from this condition. I happen to know from my own constituency that the people we are talking about include former GCHQ workers, lawyers and teachers. It is heartbreaking to see lives curtailed and potential going to waste.

The symptoms of ME have already been referred to, but they bear emphasis. They include post-exertional malaise, muscle and joint pain, cognitive difficulties, noise and light sensitivities and digestive problems. We know all that, but there is one additional point that I want to mention. Although ME patients, contrary to another myth, are no more likely to suffer from poor mental health or emotional problems than the general population, adults with ME are six times more likely to die by suicide—six times more likely. When one considers the impact of the issues referred to very expertly by the hon. Lady—noise and light sensitivities and so on—one might be forgiven for saying, “Well, it’s not that serious, is it?” But the cumulative effect is so oppressive that it can lead people to take their own lives.
[Alex Chalk]

In the time left to me, I want to underscore two points. First, on welfare benefits, the overwhelming majority of respondents to an Action for ME survey on the issue felt that assessors had insufficient expertise. We of course understand that assessors cannot be expected to be experts in every single condition, but they do need to understand in respect of ME that the way someone presents on a particular day could give an entirely misleading picture of their condition. Why? Because the sheer effort of going to present themselves on that occasion can have long-term implications, and also the effects can be cumulative. People have good days and bad days, but that variability is not currently taken into account sufficiently and it must be.

That brings me to the second point. The issue about the NICE guidelines has been very well traversed by other hon. Members and I will not say anything further, other than to add this. Clinicians and experts will say, “Follow the evidence,” and of course they are right. Most of us in this Chamber believe in experts; we value experts and expert evidence, but patient experience is also evidence. It is quite wrong to put it in a category of experts and expert evidence, but patient experience is also evidence. It is quite wrong to put it in a category of experts and expert evidence, but patient experience is also evidence.

My final point is in respect of research. In the United States, a huge amount of research is taking place. There will be those who say, “Look, public money is extremely precious; public resources are precious.” That is absolutely right, but we know from the United States that research is having an impact. Work in the United States has led to new insights into the metabolic, immunological and neurological abnormalities of ME. Although the Department of Health and Social Care has repeatedly cited a lack of high-quality research proposals for the lack of investment, I hope that it will be able to take into account what is coming from the United States to give it some encouragement that there is scope for real advances. I underscore the point that £40 million is going into brain cancer research following the wonderful advocacy of Tessa Jowell; that places the lack of investment going into ME research in rather sharp focus.

I conclude by paying tribute to the silent sufferers of this cruel disease in our country. Let the word go out from the House of Commons: they shall be silent no longer.

2.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on advancing a cause with passion and compassion on behalf of ME sufferers and I congratulate her on encapsulating the issues so well. Her constituents will be very proud of her; she can be assured of that.

As someone who has had the opportunity to speak on behalf of ME sufferers over the years, before I came here in 2010, one frustration of my former life as a councillor and as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly was that if I put “ME” on a disability living allowance form, as it was then, that I was filling in for a constituent, and went to the GP and said, “I need a wee letter to support this person who has ME”, they would say, “They have what?”, and I would have to explain. That is in the past now, thank goodness, and I can honestly say that in the past few years there has been a better understanding from GPs and doctors in my constituency. They have come round from not understanding ME to understanding it, so when someone needs a form to be filled in, it is filled in right; if they need a support letter, that happens too. That is very important.

It was my pleasure to support the hon. Member for Glasgow North West at the Backbench Business Committee, so I wanted to make a contribution today.

Carol Monaghan: I should have paid tribute to all hon. Members who supported my application for the debate, and who came along to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee, like the hon. Gentleman. I see several of them present, and I thank them.

Jim Shannon: We are always very pleased to support the hon. Lady’s proposals to the Backbench Business Committee.

This is an emotive issue. Many constituents have contacted me in anger, frustration and hurt as they simply feel that their illness is not understood and that successive Governments and some in the Department of Health and Social Care have shown no desire to gain an understanding—I say that respectfully, and I understand that some might say that healthcare is devolved. That is not the case for everyone, but it is certainly how many of my constituents have said that they feel.

We are fortunate to have a Minister who has a deep interest in this subject matter. He is in deep conversation with his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), at the moment, but I am sure he will turn round shortly and be aware of my contribution. I am sure that he will respond constructively.

I want to thank MEAction, Action for ME, the ME Association, the ME Trust, Blue Ribbon for the Awareness of ME, the Centre for Welfare Reform, Forward-ME, ME Research UK, the Welsh Association of ME and CFS Support and Hope 4 ME Fibro NI in particular. All those organisations—there are lots of them—have furnished us with lots of information, and I thank them. I particularly thank one constituent, Sally Burch, who ensured that I had all the details and information to help me. She comes to see me regularly and fills me in on all the details.

ME is a chronic fluctuating neurological condition that causes symptoms that physically affect many bodily systems, commonly the nervous and immune systems, and affects an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK, as other hon. Members have said—it is not just an illness in adults. Approximately 7,000 people in Northern Ireland and about 17 million people worldwide have ME.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of children with ME. It has an impact on their education because of the lack of access to consistently available home education where that is necessary. Does he agree that the Minister may want to take that up with his colleagues in the Department for Education?
Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which gives me a chance to say that I have constituents who have had to be home-schooled for the simple reason that they have ME. I am well aware that the illness affects not just adults, but children, and I have seen the effect on their education as well.

Very few of the hospital-based ME services provide a domiciliary service for people who are unable to attend an outpatient department. There is now only one hospital service that has dedicated in-patient beds for the assessment and management of people who require hospital admission to a ward where staff have experience in dealing with the condition.

Specialist services for ME are scarce and under-resourced, as many hon. Members have said. I am ashamed to say that in Northern Ireland, my home nation, there are no services, which makes it all the worse. We have a non-functioning Assembly, as many hon. Members will know, which means that trying to initiate something is even more difficult now than in the past. The only way to get the attention and dedication that is needed to treat ME is to ensure that it is correctly classified, which has not happened so far.

The briefing I received provided so much information that it would be impossible to go into all the details in the short time that I have available, and I will not try to do that, but I will highlight the problem of the 2007 PACE trial that my constituents raised with me. In 2007, NICE recommended graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy for patients with ME. That guideline was based on weak evidence from small trials, so the much larger PACE trial was designed as a definitive test of such therapies. It cost some £5 million and was funded mostly by the Medical Research Council, with, uniquely, some funding from the Department for Work and Pensions. PACE researchers reported that with cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy approximately 60% of patients improved and 22% recovered. The treatments were claimed to be moderately effective and safe.

However, PACE’s claims ran counter to patients’ knowledge and lived experience. My constituents told me that that was not how it really was. That led some to examine the trial’s methods, and they found two considerable problems. First, the objective results were poor. After a year of therapy, the graded exercise therapy group’s increase in walking speed was less than half that achieved in three weeks by a sample of class II chronic heart failure patients receiving graded exercise. The trials were suspect before we even got the information.

Secondly, after the trial had finished, the PACE authors lowered the threshold they used as the definition of improvement—it was as if they had taken the figures and manipulated them to get what they wanted. That inflated the number of participants who were classed as recovered or improved. In some cases, even patients whose condition had deteriorated during the trial were classed as recovered. I believe in miracles—I know they happen—but that was not one of them, because people had not recovered.

After spending more than £200,000 fighting a freedom of information request, Queen Mary University of London, PACE’s data custodian, had to share access to the data. Subsequent re-analyses have shown that changes to the criteria for recovery and improvement distorted the results.

All that was highlighted to me during a constituency meeting with Sally Burch and other ME sufferers, including a wonderfully intelligent constituent of mine who had raised the questions that I had asked at Westminster. We discussed the letters that I had written to the Minister about the trial. She explained her day-to-day life. I knew her day-to-day life as a healthy person, so now that she was not, I could clearly see the difference. She said that her treatment and care are not acceptable.

Hope 4 ME Fibro NI, of which many of my constituents are members, underlined its opinion on the need for ME inclusion in the medical curriculum after the charity hosted an ME educational event on 24 May at Queen’s University Belfast, which nearly 400 medical students attended, as did many lecturers. They all have the same interest in ME: how we go forward, what the PACE trial did and whether it helps us. If it does not help us, let us highlight that. The results of the charity’s questionnaire are revealing and clearly demonstrate the desperate need for ME to be included in the medical curriculum. Other hon. Members have spoken and will speak about the need for research. We are looking for many answers, as always, but if there was one particular issue that we are looking for help with, it would be the research. Perhaps the Minister will give us the encouragement that we need in his response.

ME is a serious illness, which seriously affects so many in our communities. These people are not lazy and they must not be made to feel like that. To say to an ME sufferer, “Get up and have a walk. You will be fine,” is tantamount to saying to someone with a bullet in his leg, “Stick a plaster on it, ignore the blood flowing down and soldier on.” We must send the message that that does not work and is not helpful. We in this place must ensure that diagnosis and care are appropriate, which is not the current situation, so I fully support the calls of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West.

On behalf of my constituents, and all constituents across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I am asking not simply for words of understanding from the Minister, but for action to be taken to change the “Get up and get on with it” mentality to an “I will help you to get up and get on with it, and find a way to facilitate an easier way of living your life” mentality.

In this debate, we want to highlight ME and show what the problems are. We look to the Minister for action; we need his help to make it happen. We need something practical that can and will help, and that will give encouragement to our constituents and to all ME sufferers across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

2.39 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Rosindell, for calling me to speak.

I am here to speak today partly because constituents have been in touch to ask me to do so, but also because I have a very good friend who has been affected by myalgic encephalomyelitis, or ME, since about the age of 15 and she is in her early forties now. When I say “affected by” ME, that means that she did not go on to college and she has never held a job. She is not at the worst end of the spectrum of severity, but I think I can probably best describe her condition as just almost constantly feeling rough. So, it is like either having flu or migraines, or aches and pains.
[Kerry McCarthy]

I am aware of my friend’s condition. Obviously, it is one thing to read up on the condition or to hear accounts from constituents who come to see me, and I have had constituents with ME and fibromyalgia, which is a similar condition, come and talk to me. However, when someone has a very close friend with ME, they know that every time they try to make a social engagement with them, it will always be, “Well, Lucy will come if she’s up to it that day.” My friends and I are all planning to watch the football together on Sunday. However, we will not know until Sunday morning whether Lucy is well enough to attend, and half the time that she does come along to events, it is possible to tell that she is struggling with a migraine or flu, but she just desperately wants to see her friends. That really brings home just how debilitating a condition ME is.

As the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, there is a cumulative effect with ME. People make such a big deal of having a cold, or just feeling a bit under the weather, or feeling hungover. Lucy feels like that most of the time and obviously there are other people with ME who are completely bedridden or who cannot bear bright lights. I had a member of staff whose younger brother came to her wedding in a wheelchair; because he had ME. So it affects people in many ways.

However, in some ways the cruellest impact of ME is the fact that sufferers are not believed and that it is a hidden illness, so to speak. The ME campaign group, Millions Missing, recently held an event in Bristol, where friends and relatives of those with ME laid out pairs of shoes to represent some of those who are suffering from the illness, which effectively renders them invisible, and they also read out stories of the battles that their friends and family members had gone through, as well as expressing their determination to see real change happen.

The organisation Action for ME used to be based in the centre of Bristol but is now based just outside. What really hits home is its raison d’être, as set out on its website, which says the organisation exists “to take action to end the ignorance, injustice and neglect faced by people”

who have ME. Most other campaign groups for medical conditions do not have to start from there; their starting point might be to raise awareness of the symptoms of particular conditions, or to make calls for treatment. To have to start from the point of view of emphasising the injustice and neglect, because so many people deny that ME exists, just shows how much of a battle we have on our hands.

It was an excellent speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. As she said, ME affects around 250,000 people in the UK. I will just cite one of my constituents who contacted me to stress the lack of support and understanding that had been experienced when dealing with medical professionals; there are many people with ME for whom it takes a long, long time to get a diagnosis, because of that lack of support and understanding.

My constituent got in touch to share the story of her close friend’s 28-year-old son, who has had ME for last couple of years. She said that the impact on his life has been catastrophic. He was a highly skilled and highly valued journalist for a national newspaper, with a busy and vibrant professional and social life. Since contracting ME, he has been unable to work and is now living at home with his parents, who act as his carers. He has severely limited energy, he is in constant pain and he has obtained no relief or satisfaction from the treatments currently available through the NHS, his GP and the specialists to whom he has been referred. His parents have been left to research and self-funded investigations and treatment themselves, which is plainly not good enough.

In Bristol, we have a chronic fatigue syndrome/ME centre, but it has no doctors and focuses primarily on training in activity management. One of my constituents who received treatment there was highly complimentary about the staff, but she echoes the view of many other patients that occupational therapy is an inadequate approach for people with a highly disabling, multi-systemic disease.

The current National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline recommends treatment consisting of graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, but it has been criticised by all ME charities, patient organisations and representatives registered with NICE as stakeholders. We have already heard from a few people today about that.

Michelle Donelan: On that point, one of my constituents is a 15-year-old who finds the graded exercises very debilitating; actually, they make her condition worse, which has been echoed by ME charities and the ME community. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to look at graded exercise again in the new NICE guidelines?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes. So much concern has been expressed about graded exercise therapy and many patients prefer the concept of pacing, which is balancing activity and rest to help them to manage their ME and work towards recovery. However, that approach is not currently recommended by NICE. I very much hope that the Minister picks this issue up, because it is probably the most controversial issue around the treatment of ME at the moment. I welcome NICE’s decision to review its guidelines—the new guidelines are expected in October 2020, I think—and I urge NICE to listen to the voices of patients with ME.

We have heard from other speakers about biomedical research and the decades of underinvestment in that research. We have also heard that the average research spend per person living with ME is less than £1 a year and that much of that money is provided by charities rather than Government. We can also consider the economic cost of not helping people at least to find a way to manage a condition such as ME; ideally, we would find the cause of ME and a cure for it. Clearly, that economic cost is unacceptable.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The hon. Member has made a very important point about the decades of underinvestment. A friend of mine, John Peters, suffers from ME and was first struck down in the 1980s. The impact on his life has been total. He acknowledges that he would not have been able to do everything in life; he knows that there would have been ups and downs. But as he quite painfully put it to me, he has not had the...
chance to fail. His is a life unlived. So, given those decades of underinvestment, it is so important that we now change things for the future.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes. This is the problem we see over and over again with NICE: how do we value quality of life? We can look at the economic opportunities that are also lost if someone has to spend a lifetime on benefits rather than working and paying taxes, but there is so much more that they could perhaps have contributed to society and that opportunity has simply been lost.

In the time that is left to me today, I will mention the benefits system. We have already heard from other Members about it. Time and time again, we see that the assessments for employment and support allowance and for the personal independence payment just cannot cope with people who have fluctuating conditions, or with people who might be able to pass a test but who feel absolutely dreadful afterwards.

My friend scored zero on the test because she was trying to be as honest as possible, and if she was asked whether she could walk up a flight of stairs, she would reply that she could. However, on a bad day it would probably take her an awfully long time and she would collapse in a heap at the top. Actually, one of the reasons she was turned down when she went for the face-to-face assessment was that the examiners said, “Well, you look very presentable and you’ve washed your face.” I know that she is bedridden for days at a time and cannot wash her hair, but clearly if she drags herself out for an assessment and is well enough to answer that she could. However, on a bad day it would probably take her an awfully long time and she would collapse in a heap at the top. Actually, one of the reasons she was turned down when she went for the face-to-face assessment was that the examiners said, “Well, you look very presentable and you’ve washed your hair.” I know that she is bedridden for days at a time and cannot wash her hair, but clearly if she drags herself out for an assessment and is well enough to attend it on a particular day, she will try not to look like she has just got out of bed.

Carol Monaghan: Does the hon. Member agree that such questions are entirely unsuitable for people with many conditions but particularly for ME sufferers? “Can you walk up a flight of stairs?” “Yes, but it wipes me out for three weeks afterwards.” The examiners are not interested in the “but”. That does not figure in the questions.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, we need a system that is sensitive to the people who are taking the test, rather than being a series of tick-box exercises—yes or no.

Action for ME gave some interesting evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee when it conducted an inquiry into ESA and PIP towards the end of last year. Action for ME cited one case study of a man who, as well as having ME, is registered blind; he can only just perceive some light. He said, “I’m not disabled by blindness. In comparison to living with ME, my blindness is just an inconvenience.” When it came to the assessment, of course, his blindness scored maximum points, but his ME did not register at all. He said, “Actually, with my blindness I can still go out and walk my dog, but it’s the ME that means I’m housebound. With blindness, I can use audiobooks, but my ME means that I just can’t concentrate for any period of time.” But one condition is accepted as a disabling condition, while the other is not. There is a perception that ME is just about being tired all the time but, as one ME campaigner said:

“The difference between ME and just feeling tired is the same as the difference between having a shower and drowning.”

I was going to mention the case of Merryn Crofts, but my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is here and she is her MP. That is clearly an incredibly tragic case—the second person in the UK to have ME recorded as the reason for death on her death certificate.

Instead, I will conclude by mentioning the documentary “Unrest”, a screening of which I attended. Jennifer Brea, a 28-year-old ME sufferer, documented her condition with a camera when doctors told her that her illness was all in her head. Using Skype, she connected with others around the globe suffering with ME, and documented their plight. It is a powerful and moving documentary about the realities of life for many people with severe ME, and I would encourage anyone who is looking to gain a better understanding of the illness to watch it.

2.50 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for this campaign, which she is doing a superb job of leading. I cannot remember the name of the academic who wrote to her reproaching her for the stance she has taken in the campaign, but I say to her, I think on behalf of us all, that she is doing exactly what an MP should be doing, and shame on anyone who says otherwise.

I specifically compliment the hon. Lady on her presence at the recent Edinburgh event with the hashtag #MillionsMissing—a global day of action. The purpose of that event was to raise awareness, to highlight the need for support for ME sufferers, and to call for investment in healthcare and biomedical research, which is an excellent summary of the purpose of today’s debate. As has been mentioned, every participant in that event was invited to bring a pair of shoes, but what touched me deeply in the event publicity was that those pairs of shoes symbolised the millions of patients who are missing from their lives because of this devastating disease. The phrase “missing from their lives” deeply touched me.

I rise to speak just for a few minutes to highlight the experience of those who are affected by ME. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, their evidence is compelling and should be a primary consideration. It has been upsetting for me to hear how many people, including those in the medical profession, are unaware, or lack a detailed understanding, of ME. Many persist in believing that the disease is some form of mental illness or neurological disorder. A constituent in Stirling told me that as recently as 2011 they were told, “There is no such thing as ME,” after collapsing at work. She has since been diagnosed with severe ME.

There are many distressing stories about the treatment of people suffering from ME. Another of my constituents was told repeatedly by different doctors that her ME was a psychological problem, and was referred on multiple occasions for psychological assessments. It took her two and a half years to get a proper ME diagnosis.

Carol Monaghan: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the aspect of “medically unexplained symptoms” diverting ME down the psychological path?

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.
I cannot speak too highly of Helen Hyland, a constituent of mine, who has done so much to raise awareness of the condition across the UK in her role within the ME Association. She has also done so much to educate me as her Member of Parliament about this disease. Soon after my election as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, Helen reached out to inform me of what I could do to help the campaign. I am grateful that my office and I have been able to work with her to highlight ME to GPs in Stirling. I am not sure how they have responded to a letter from their Member of Parliament advising them to be careful about how they diagnose those who have the symptoms of ME; I am sure that is a different story.

Helen has been involved with the ME Association since her husband took his own life, a year after being diagnosed with ME. The way she told her children, who were very small at the time, of her husband’s passing outlines how hard ME is to cope with. She said:

“Imagine a Dr Who monster getting inside and taking over Daddy’s head and body. The harder Daddy fights, the harder the monster fights back. The monster always wins”.

For people with ME and those around them, the diagnosis is crucially important. To be told that they have a medically recognised condition is validation for them, yet there is still so little known about this illness. There is no easy way of diagnosing it, no clear treatment, and no known cure. That has to change. Along with many others, I will continue to support the ME Association and any campaign that pledges itself to combating ME.

I will now turn to the first-hand account of a lady called Jules Smith, who wrote to me and asked me to make her voice heard in this afternoon’s debate. I will do that because her story, as touching as it is, is not her story alone, but the story of many others. She wrote to me:

“For over ten years I was a therapist and devoted my life to helping others as best I could.

I first became ill about 8 years ago but kept going and put it down to general aches and pains. I finally had to give up what I loved in November 2016 with a final diagnosis of severe ME in May 2017.

I’ve been to psychology to be told it’s all in my head, pain management to be told push through the pain and physiotherapy who told me my muscles were so weak there was nothing they could do!

I’ve been on so many prescribed medications and vitamins; last year I was taking in excess of 22 tablets a day and yet I would still crash.

I am 90% house and bed bound and my GP has exhausted all avenues for me therefore—as I was told—’you must try and manage your illness as best you can.’

I had been told that graded exercise therapy would help me starting off by stretching then low impact sports like walking. I’m an ex-runner who was capable of running a 10k every week so I was familiar with pushing through the pain barrier and grading my exercise but it has made me more severe. I feel like my life is just wasting away; I get all my prescription medications on repeat, I get a telephone appointment with my GP every once in a while, and that’s it!

My husband works long shifts with the Scottish Prison Service and I’m home alone for at least 10 hours a day; sometimes I have to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the bathroom and I can go days on end without being able to bathe or shower as I’m just too exhausted to move!

I feel like so many others that we are just left to rot; I feel like my mental health is now suffering as I become more and more isolated from society and there’s no one to help me and many others just like me.

I am severely fatigued to the point that I cannot stand upright otherwise I get so dizzy I’m about to faint. I also have severe laboured breathing but there’s nothing recommended but rest and resting doesn’t cure ME.

I don’t wallow in self-pity. I spend what time I can online being an advocate for Action for ME and Millions Missing Scotland and whenever I can, I offer support to other members of the social media groups I am in and share my stories and experiences.

I have a devoted and caring husband who does everything he physically can to look after me but it’s tough when I’m home alone for so long with no care.

I try to do what I can to keep my spirits up but on days when I crash for no reason and I can’t watch TV, or read a book, I have to have my curtains drawn and be in a darkroom. Sometimes I even need soft silicone earplugs to block out any noise as I get cognitive dysfunction too!

This is not living; this is just existing!”

I thank Jules for allowing me to share her story in the debate. I am grateful and feel privileged that I was allowed to let her voice be heard today in Parliament.

2.59 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. May I first say how moving and graphic the speech from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) was? I am so pleased that I was here to hear it.

I shall speak briefly because much of what I would have said has been said already, but I want to add my voice to all those demanding that we take ME seriously—that in the future, doctors and the medical profession do what they can to find out what causes it and to deal with that, but also to make lives bearable and strive to find cures if we possibly can.

I first became aware of ME some 30 years ago when two young relatives—close relatives, although not in my immediate family—contracted ME. They suffered for a long time during their childhood and youth. The condition is much improved now, but I became aware of the medical profession’s lack of belief in ME. They were constantly told that it was a psychological problem, not a medical or physiological one. We now know better.

There has been discredited research, such as the PACE trial—and others, no doubt—which is now being dismissed, and not before time. However, the medical profession and, indeed, Governments will grasp at things that encourage them to do nothing, or not to do something that is very difficult. To deal with it is very difficult.

We heard from the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan)—she has just left her place—who is the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Lyme disease. I also belong to that group, because I had a very dear friend who suffered terribly from Lyme disease and who was not diagnosed for years. She suffered terrible psychological and physical problems, as well as marital break-up and so on. If people are not properly diagnosed and are not given the proper treatment and sympathy, they can suffer even worse than they do with the disease.

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

The conditions vary enormously. People suffer very different symptoms, and some people suffer very severe symptoms. I had one constituent who, like so many...
I have taken up this issue in the recent past, prompted by an old friend, Dr Ian Gibson, who was a Member of Parliament for one of the Norwich seats. He wrote to me about the PACE research, dismissing it as nonsense in the very strongest terms. He asked me to table a series of parliamentary questions, which I did, and I like to think they had some influence on the Government’s thinking. I hope the Minister will recognise the depth of feeling about the appalling way ME sufferers have been treated for so long, and start to take steps to correct that.

We are used to having experts tell us things and deferring to them, rightly in many cases, but of course sometimes experts get it wrong. Sixty or 70 years ago, some doctors were known to recommend that patients take up smoking because it would be good for their health. No doubt, some of those people died of lung cancer later on. It was a terrible thing to do, and some of those doctors should have felt rather guilty about that afterwards.

There was a particular case in the 1960s of a noted famous psychologist who wrote books about psychiatry that were regarded as bibles by young people. His view was that there was no such thing as mental ill health; it was just a different way of viewing the world. He was famously debunked when he was speaking at a conference to an audience of schizophrenics. They got up and said, “You are trying to tell us we are well—that we are just putting it on, or, as he said, that it is an alternative way of viewing the world. At the end of his life, that famous psychologist publicly recanted on the radio, after he no doubt caused much suffering to many people through his life.

We must always make sure that there is a proper evidence base and that statistics are properly measured. We had a paper circulated to us that shows that the PACE statistics were false. They just did not work. We want more resources put into making sure that proper research is done and that ME sufferers are properly supported financially and medically. We have to find what causes it. We have to find cures where we can, and we have to make the lives of people who suffer from ME a lot happier in future.

I have said more than enough. I wanted to add my voice to all of those who have spoken so brilliantly today, in particular the lead speaker, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who made a brilliant and eloquent speech that I am sure we are all very grateful for.

3.5 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this very important debate.

Merryn Crofts, who has already been referred to in this debate, is one of just two people in the UK who have had myalgic encephalomyelitis recorded as the cause of death. She was my constituent and lived in Norden in the Rochdale area of the Heywood and Middleton constituency. I spoke with her mum, Clare, this week, who told me that the reports about Merryn in the newspapers did not really cover the whole of Merryn’s condition. Clare wanted to be here today to hear the debate, but could not travel to London because of a new baby in the family, so I hope that she is able to watch the debate back home in Rochdale. I send my best wishes to her and to the new baby.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As do all of us.

Liz McInnes: Indeed, from all of us. Merryn met all the diagnostic criteria set by NICE, and the Canadian consensus criteria, for a diagnosis of myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome. Merryn was totally bedbound. She physically could not get out of bed. She suffered so badly from postural hypotension that she blacked out if placed in a sitting position or even if her bed was raised slightly. She was hypersensitive to noise, light, touch and movement. She suffered so badly from pain—head, muscle, neurological and stomach pain—that she could not get out of bed. Her GP had worked in a hospice for 10 years, looking after cancer patients, and said that in that job she could not always take away pain, but she could manage it. In Merryn’s case, the GP said that her pain was unmanageable. Although Merryn was on diamorphine and ketamine, she was still in pain. Any kind of stimulus, even just a nurse walking in to the room, was an exertion to Merryn. She was permanently on syringe drivers and receiving injections. She was permanently nauseous.

The terms ME and chronic fatigue syndrome are often used interchangeably, but Merryn’s mum tells me that fatigue was the least of Merryn’s symptoms. In her view, the use of the term chronic fatigue syndrome should be abandoned, as myalgic encephalomyelitis is about so much more than just fatigue.

Merryn was only 15 years old when her illness started. For the first year, she was not housebound and she used to go out in a wheelchair, but as her condition worsened she became unable to go out. She went from a young girl who loved life, with passions for drama and acting, to a housebound patient, whose family had to do more and more for her, even things like chatting on her behalf on social media—simple things that she was no longer able to do on her own.

I mention social media because Merryn was helped a great deal by the online ME community. Her mum tells me that Merryn always wanted positive support and was very choosy about who she communicated with. She did not want to speak with people who exuded negativity, but she was part of a big online ME community, which included people such as ballet dancers and sportspeople. That raises the issue of whether research should look at the lifestyles of those who contract ME and whether there is a susceptibility that can be exacerbated by leading an active life and pursuing strenuous sports or vocations.

Merryn’s mum is critical of the PACE guidance given by NICE and attributes the worsening of Merryn’s condition to it. She tells me that Merryn thought she could push through the condition and keep going, although her family really wanted her to slow down. Sadly, it was only when the family contacted a private
medical practitioner that Merryn was given the advice to slow down and told that she needed to rest. The specific advice given was: “Whatever you feel you can do, only do 50% of it.” Merryn’s mum feels very strongly that had Merryn been given that advice when her condition started, she might not have gone on to develop severe ME, and she strongly urges that the NICE guidelines should be reviewed. Merryn’s mum said: “If the PACE trial were a drug, it would have been banned by now.”

I hope and I am sure that the Minister will refer to that in his response.

Merryn’s family are still very involved in the ME community and they run the “Merryn’s Legacy” Facebook page, which raises money for research and includes fundraising activities such as skydiving and climbing Ben Nevis: impressive feats that are done on behalf of the ME community as representative of the things they would like to do but are unable to because of their condition. The fundraisers do those activities on their behalf.

We need to invest more in research into ME. The best research, as has already been mentioned, is being done in the States. Here it is very much funded by charities and tends to concentrate on psychological issues rather than physical changes such as inflammation of the brain and changes to the central nervous system, and we need to do much more research into the physical aspect.

Nancy Klimas is a major ME researcher based in Miami. She has more than 30 years’ professional experience and has achieved international recognition for her work on ME. She compares patients with severe ME, like Merryn, with those in the terminal stages of HIV/AIDS infection in terms of the levels of pain that they suffer. Many comparisons can be drawn between HIV/AIDS and ME. When HIV was first identified it was thought to be incurable and a certain death sentence, but incredible research has produced advanced treatment with retrovirals, which, although they do not provide a cure, can be used to manage the disease, and it is no longer the death sentence that it was.

In comparison, ME is not seen as a death sentence, but, as Merryn’s case sadly shows, it can be fatal. It is also described as a kind of living death. The work done on HIV/AIDS shows how powerful good research can be. I hope that in future, following investment in ME research, we may also see great advances made in the treatment and knowledge of ME.

We also need to invest more in training for our doctors, especially general practitioners who are the clinicians likely to be the first port of call for those suffering with ME. Our GPs need the skills to recognise the signs and symptoms and to signpost patients to the appropriate specialists. I hope that the Minister might be able to refer to those points in his response. I am immensely grateful to Merryn’s family for sharing so much with me and for allowing me to tell her story.

3.13 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this debate and for speaking so passionately. I stand with her and all the people affected by ME in not allowing the voices of ME sufferers to be silenced by anyone for any reason.

In Plymouth, ME affects between 500 and 1,500 people. I agree with the sentiments expressed by hon. Members appropriate specialists. I hope that they are not believed, that their condition does not matter and that nothing is being done about it.

A few days ago I mentioned on my Facebook page that I wanted to speak in the debate and I asked for stories from people in Plymouth. I have done that before for various debates and have always been struck by the level of honesty and directness that comes from people simply telling their story, not as a politician but as a person. I will share some of those stories today mainly because the speeches before mine have expertly and succinctly explained the problems with the PACE trial and current treatments. I want to make sure that those voices are heard. One word came through in nearly all of the posts on my Facebook page and on my Twitter, and that word was “invisible”. People with ME feel that they are not believed, that their condition does not matter and that nothing is being done about it. I want to address what it means to be invisible and what we can do.

Jules wrote:

“Just getting up the stairs lays me out for hours. Having a shower leaves me laid out in a darkened room. I can’t work anymore (believe me not for want of trying)! I can’t do drama, Rock Choir or Zumba in fact just making a cup of tea leaves me as exhausted as Zumba used to! I lay alone at home. I live vicariously through FB. I still get out when I can but it will usually cost me days or weeks in bed. I am one of the ‘lucky’ ones. I am not totally bed bound. But I pay for this with my invisibility. I ‘look’ so well! No one can see my pain. I smile and say I am fine then go home to bed.”

The word “invisibility” is key here. People talk about it time and again in terms of how the condition affects their lives and relationships—my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about that—and how it often makes them doubt their validity and whether they are telling the truth.

Several people told me about how having ME also affects their mental health, which the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) talked about earlier. Catherine wrote:

“I first became ill just before my 21st birthday. I spent weeks needing to be cared for full time by my parent—including being carried by my dad because I was unable to walk. I am always in pain, have difficulty doing things that most people take for granted and lost much of my long-term memory. Long term it affects my memory and focus, my ability to function on a daily basis. I am constantly tired no matter how much I sleep. I have lost friends and needed to give up a career in teaching that I loved. I walk with a stick much of the time, especially in the winter...because my balance is bad and I fall easily. I suffer depression, bouts of anxiety”,

and “problems that can be very embarrassing and never know whether the next flare might put me back where I started.”

ME is not simply one thing on its own. We need to recognise that mental health problems can stem from the experience of living with ME. It adds to the condition and is not just a part of the condition itself.
Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I have heard from many constituents affected by ME who asked me to come today to make their voices heard. He made the point about invisibility earlier, but some of the people who are not able to get out do things from their beds. For example, one of my constituents organised the lighting up of the Tyne Bridge in blue last year, so there are things that people do to make sure we get the message across.

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I am a big believer in digital. As colleagues in the House know, I often talk about it. The ability of digital communities to connect the ME community to help them share experiences and realise they are not on their own is especially important, and I pay tribute to all the people like my hon. Friend’s constituent who do so much.

I want to talk about the effect of ME on young people. The condition affects people of all ages, but sometimes the most acute effects are felt by those whose lives have effectively been taken away at such a young age. Dawn reached out to tell me about her son who is 16 years old and suffers from ME. It was initially brushed off as a migraine and a growing pain and she was told children sometimes get stomach aches. She wrote:

“Miss intelligent, sporty, active son has now spent over two years virtually housebound. This horrible illness has robbed my son of his teenage years. He only has one friend, has huge gaps in his education, won’t be at the School Leavers’ Assembly, nor the prom. He had to give up football and badminton, his real loves. And all we can do is wait until he gets better.”

The stories of young people with ME are especially powerful, because we all recognise the potential in young people and what amazing things, given the right opportunities and support, they can and will do. For many young people with ME that potential is taken away, and it is especially acute because losing time during their school years affects not only their education but their societal development and the friendship networks they build around them.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend will be interested to hear about her sister, who is affected by ME. She says:

“Chronic illnesses need far more support and recognition than they get.”

Her sister—like Maya herself, who has fibromyalgia—“faced repeated uphill battles to get the help she needs, and that’s even been with health professionals.

It’s so little talked about that even doctors and nurses have been stumped as to how to help her. This disease cripples and takes lives and we need to be doing more.”

There is something that we can take from the debate today, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham in relation to brain tumour research—the fact that the power of talking about a condition can bring about change. We saw that with Baroness Jowell, and it is happening today with motor neurone disease, as it is global MND Awareness Day. People are talking about their condition. We also see it in the work on fibromyalgia being done by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). It is a matter of talking about things that are not often talked about. The importance of debates such as this is in raising awareness. People with ME are not invisible. They are as human as we are, and need to be seen and heard. That means investing in proper medical research and in medical education for practitioners, and in a relentless fight against stigma for all people with ME.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The hon. Gentleman began by talking about stigma—the stigma of laziness or of something “in the head”. We all know that the sort of people afflicted by ME are certainly not lazy. As to its being in the head, there may be some psychological causes of ME but it is none the less an illness, and to treat it as if it were not is to reinforce the stigma that has been so damaging with respect to mental health.

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. I think those were the most important words I have heard the right hon. Gentleman say since I was elected. He is famous for short questions. I agree entirely, and the challenge of addressing stigma is understanding, because stigma builds where there is not a clear evidence base, and there is no understanding of what is happening to an individual—we do not know whether it is one or many things. That is why medical research is essential. It is also why understanding how the condition changes day to day is important—as is the way the Government prepare and support individuals. The DWP assessments are a great example. The assessment system at the moment is built around a system that does not adequately recognise the day-to-day lived experiences of those with ME.

We can carry on the relentless fight that is needed against stigma, to encourage more research, if we keep talking about ME and remember that people who have it are not invisible. They have a voice and must be heard.

3.23 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve beneath your benevolent oversight, Mr Gapes. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) is on the Opposition Front Bench, and I am also pleased to see the Minister. Those two people combine deep humanity with real understanding of how illness is examined, and how stereotypes and stigma can be challenged. Above all, I pay tribute, as everyone who has taken part in the debate would wish to do, to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I was one of those privileged to support her in applying to the Backbench Business Committee. It is interesting that sitting with her at the table were members of the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, Labour and the Conservative party. There were no Liberals there at the time, but the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was present earlier.

We supported the application for a debate so strongly not only because there is a crying need for some proper authoritative research at last but because of the personality of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West and the
way she argued her case. She is not just a great humanitarian, but a scientist. She was a physics teacher, and is a pilot. She understands the importance of empirical evidence and data, and wants to see scientific evidence. On the occasion of our application, someone said that encephalomyelitis is probably the illness with the worst public relations officer ever, because there is no other illness so badly presented, or about which so much nonsense is spoken, or that has so many stigmas and stereotypes. One reason I supported the hon. Lady was that she seeks to cut through all the nonsense, get back to proper, hard scientific evidence, and move away from some of the dismissive, cruel and frankly painful comments that are made.

There are a number of arguments in favour of proper analysis and, subsequent to that, treatment, research and proper therapeutic assistance for what is a ghastly, debilitating illness. There is the economic case. In September 2017 the Optimum Health Clinic Foundation produced a detailed breakdown, in which it was calculated that the illness costs the UK economy more than £3 billion a year. That is an argument that can be made, but I would go beyond Gradvinskian, and that sort of desiccated, calculating machine politics, to the humanity.

I want to talk about one particular group—children and young people. I am sure that it has already been mentioned that 21 years ago Dowsett and Colby produced detailed research showing that the biggest cause of long-term school absence was, as Members may guess, encephalomyelitis. Let us imagine the situation. A child at primary school has the symptoms of encephalomyelitis but does not know the name, probably could not pronounce it, and does not know what it is. However, they cannot get themselves to school. I am not talking about the schoolboy, with his “shining morning face, creeping like snail Unwillingly to school.”

I mean a child who simply cannot get out of bed or off the sofa or couch, and to school. What happens to such a child? I will tell the House—often they are referred to social services. Child protection referrals are often made because a child misses school. Imagine the impact on that child, usually only and school. I have known you long enough, Mr Gapes, to know that you have the milk of human kindness flowing through your veins. Can you imagine what it must be like for a primary school-aged child who is suffering from something terrible that they cannot even put into words to be penalised for it—interrogated and asked to prove that they are ill when they can hardly bring themselves even to speak or raise the energy to make their case? How cruel.

In some cases, the parents simply will not know. One reason I am so particularly keen to get some proper empirical data and research is that a family can have four, five or six children, and one suffers but the others do not. Imagine how the one child must feel, and how the other children will react to the one child. Can we imagine anything more brutally cruel than a situation in which a child is trying to pursue their education but is physically incapable of doing so? The great lesson that we learned from Sure Start—and, earlier, from the Jesuits—is that getting things wrong in the first seven years usually means they are wrong for life. If a child is suffering in the way I described, in the first few years in primary school, I despair for their future.

We must cut through all the mist, fog and obfuscation—the stigma, and all the words and insulting expressions—and do some research. Is the condition psychological, physical or psychosomatic? What is it? We know it cannot go unaddressed any longer. We cannot allow another generation to grow up incapable even of giving a name to what they suffer from. If diagnosis is not possible, what is the prognosis and the therapeutic response? What is the health service doing? What of primary care and the GP service? If they do not have the data, they cannot produce a cure. I do not make the economic argument, although obviously it is important. We need productivity and economic activity. However, it is above all the sheer humanity of the case made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West in her brilliant speech that will have swept along everyone who heard it today. We simply cannot allow this situation to continue any longer. It is too painful, cruel, counterproductive and dangerous, and we are losing young people.

I know that there is mature-onset ME—it is not just children who are affected—but the people it affects have good advocates, and great speeches have been made on their behalf this afternoon. I want to make the case for children, because they can very seldom make that case for themselves. I look to the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West. Today is the day when we finally start to take encephalomyelitis seriously and stop condemning people suffering from this ghastly, debilitating disease. Today is the day when we say, “Yes, we understand the pain people suffer. Yes, we are going to do something about it. Yes, we respect you. Yes, we value you. Yes, today we are going to start investing in diagnosis, analysis and, God willing, a cure.”

3.30 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this debate, for setting out the issues so powerfully, and for sharing the sad case of Merryn Crofts, which the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), her MP, elaborated on.

I want to say to Professor Sharpe that it is not my hon. Friend’s conduct that is unbecoming; it is his. So holding such emails does nothing for the reputation of the scientific research community, and he should apologise.

People with ME and related conditions do not believe their voices and concerns are properly listened to. With that in mind, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who shared with great compassion Jules Smith’s story, which deeply affected Members from across the House. We sometimes talk about health issues in this House abstractly without fully conveying the impact they have on people’s lives. Well, not today.

Action for ME and the ME Association are both well represented in the Public Gallery today. Along with many other organisations, they do vital work to champion and support the 250,000 people across the UK who suffer from this condition. On its website, Action for ME tries to increase people’s understanding of ME by asking people to imagine a number of situations:

“Imagine having months off work because you are so ill, so pole-axed by fatigue and pain, that you are no longer able to tell the time when you look at the face of a clock. Imagine you can no longer read even the shortest paragraph because your power of concentration is reduced to zero.”

Stephen Pound
One of my constituents, whom I have subsequently met twice, wrote to me about the experience of living with ME. She said:

“One of the things that society needs to get to grips with is the fluctuating nature of ME where an individual may appear to be fine one day, yet the next day they are bed ridden or much worse, or they may appear fine but really aren’t. Unless people have x-ray vision, they cannot see the brain, spine, muscles, heart, cells and so on of another individual. The condition fluctuates not only from day to day and week to week, but it can vary from hour to hour. And of course there is the aspect of...post exertional exacerbation of symptoms. That is, after exertion their ME symptoms often flare up” although that can be delayed.

“For one person that exertion may be as little as getting up to brush their teeth, for another it may be that they worked 4 hours that day instead of the 3 that would have been manageable. This could leave them ill the next day or being off work for a week. There can also be a sudden and severe decline in symptoms. For example, an individual may have gone out that day feeling ok, but whilst out they suddenly reach saturation point and their levels of physical fatigue and pain may be intolerable.”

That is the experience of 250,000 people in the UK. It is important that we do much more as a society to find a cure for this disease. Sadly, the majority with ME do not have access to adequate care and resources. Shamefully, they also face ignorance and injustice from people who should know better, including medical professionals and the Government. Many primary care professionals receive minimal training on ME, and it continues to be dismissed as “medically unexplained”.

Treatment for ME currently focuses on addressing the condition’s symptoms, but, as we have heard, concerns have been raised many times about the recommended treatments, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy. Like other Members, I am glad that NICE is reviewing its guidelines, and I hope ME sufferers are at the heart of the review’s outcomes.

The Government’s welfare reforms are causing a lot of heartache and stress for millions of people, including people with ME, many of whom struggle to access welfare benefits. The written evidence that Action for ME submitted to the UK Parliament’s Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into personal independence payments and employment and support allowance assessments, which the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) touched on, raised serious concerns about how the welfare state treats people with ME. Its research found that assessors do not have a sufficient, or even basic, understanding of the condition, and so cannot carry out accurate assessments of people affected by it. That causes assessors to misinterpret the condition, wrongly diagnose it and file inaccurate reports, which have dire consequences for people’s benefit entitlements.

That basic lack of understanding of ME is forcing individuals down the mandatory reconsideration and appeal route to get access to the benefits they are rightly entitled to. Some 76% of people with ME who are forced to do that believe that the initial assessment failed to represent their condition or needs properly; 52% believe that the assessment was not conducted fairly or appropriately; and 32% say that the amount they were awarded did not cover or meet their needs.

That experience is familiar to one of my constituents, whom I assisted recently. She has ME and other medical conditions, and she told me that “ESA and PIP assessments are designed in a way that discriminates against people with ME and other fluctuating and unseen conditions. This causes untold distress and harm to people with ME, who already feel very vulnerable and unheard.” She also believes that the assessments have led to her condition deteriorating, and that “without a shadow of a doubt” she would have been able to go back to work a long time ago if it was not for the recurring relapses caused by a system that is supposed to support you while ill and while trying to recover, and instead it causes harm. It is exhausting, demeaning and damaging to recovery.” She feels that “people with ME often feel ridiculed, abandoned and even bullied and abused. It is a highly vulnerable place to be when your basic needs (and in some cases your continued existence) and the way you are treated and viewed by society is dependent upon the understanding of those with power”.

I am sure she is not the only one who feels that way.

I accept that ME can be an invisible condition, but surely the Government can take that into account so people receive fair assessments. As my constituent said, “the more people who begin to learn the truth about this devastating condition, the sooner people with ME can begin to be treated with the respect and dignity that people with serious medical conditions are entitled to.”

As a society, we need to challenge ourselves better to understand this condition, and that should start with the Government. The Scottish Government have funded a project to educate health and social care professionals, and improve the health and social care support available to people with ME. The Inform ME project will develop a peer mentoring, self-management support network to build confidence and reduce isolation among people affected by ME.

We have heard today that it is accepted that not enough research has been done to increase the knowledge of the different forms of ME. However, the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative was created in 2013, and it is hoped that greater attention will be brought to this area. It is true that ME has received far less research funding than other conditions with a similar prevalence and disease burden. The funding has tended to be for psychological and behavioural studies, rather than biomedical research. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West outlined, the Scottish Government are taking steps in this area and have recently announced a PhD scholarship focused on improving the understanding of ME.

People of all political persuasions and none want to see a world without ME. The Minister has listened to many strong views this afternoon. I know he is eagerly awaiting the outcome of the NICE review, but I hope he will take on board and reflect on the points that have been made today—in particular, those relating to GET and the DWP’s procedures for ME. I hope we can help people living with this condition sooner rather than later.

3.39 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for her excellent speech setting the scene today and for securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting
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the time for it. I also thank all hon. Members who contributed. A great number of them did so: the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), the hon. Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Dr Drew), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) all made excellent and moving speeches. I thank the many other Members who made excellent interventions. The packed Public Gallery and the number of Members attending and speaking in the debate on a Thursday afternoon shows the strength of feeling on the subject not only in Parliament but in the nation as a whole—more should be done to help people with ME. They should get the help, recognition, support and treatment that they deserve and need.

I thank MEAction, Action for ME, the ME Association and the ME Trust for the detailed brief that they sent me, and ME North East and especially the Sunderland and South Tyneside ME support group including Professor Malcolm Hooper—I first met him way back in 2010 on this very issue—for all the work that they do to campaign for better care, support and recognition for people living with ME. We have heard today in great and moving detail from numerous Members sharing tragic and very personal stories from their constituents, whom we thank for allowing their stories to be told.

ME is a neurological disease, or a disease of the central nervous system, but that does not begin to explain how devastating it can be to have to live with it—or die from it, as happened so tragically to 21-year-old Merryn Crofts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton, who was her MP, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West for sharing her story with us in some detail—I especially thank her family for allowing that—and helping to make the case so strongly in the debate.

ME affects an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK and about 17 million people worldwide. Despite the fact that so many people are affected by ME, it is little understood in the medical world, leaving patients feeling dismissed, neglected and stigmatised further by their condition. That can be no surprise, as no significant research has been done into the condition, as we have heard. ME receives far less research funding than other neurological conditions of similar prevalence or disease burden. The answer to a written question from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West revealed that the average research spend per person living with ME is only about £1 a year, as she said. Also, the majority of that research spending does not even come from Government; it comes from the charity sector.

Does the Minister think that research into this condition should be left entirely up to the charity sector? The ME charity sector in the UK does a fantastic job of researching the condition. For example, the UK ME/CFS Biobank is a vital part of the ME research infrastructure and has achieved an international reputation. All the start-up costs for the ME Biobank were funded by the charity sector, and ongoing costs are met by the ME Association’s Ramsay Research Fund. Do the Government have any plans to contribute to that research?

Patients with ME feel that they have been let down time and again as research such as the PACe trial—which, sensibly, we heard about—has been found to be seriously flawed. In fact, Jonathan Edwards, emeritus professor of medicine, said that the PACe trial would be a great example “in an undergraduate textbook as an object lesson in how not to design a trial”.

In addition, a petition signed by more than 12,000 individuals—mostly patients, but also more than 90 scientists and clinicians—and more than 50 patient groups worldwide has demanded a retraction of the results of that trial. Does the Minister agree that ME patients deserve a trial that they can trust not to dismiss their condition or recommend treatments that could make it worse? Do the Government have any plans to fund a proactive and co-ordinated piece of research on ME that patients can trust?

Given the lack of medical research into ME, healthcare professionals are, unsurprisingly, not sufficiently trained in diagnosing the condition, as hon. Members have told us today. According to several ME charities, coverage of ME in many medical textbooks remains inadequate and can be misleading or even non-existent. The chief medical officer’s report and the NICE guidelines on ME set out clear timeline markers for making an early and accurate diagnosis. Both recommend that adults should normally have had the diagnosis confirmed within four months of onset of symptoms, or within three months for children and young people. However, standard medical tests often find nothing wrong, which leads many doctors initially to dismiss ME as psychological.

In 2016 a patient survey by the ME Association indicated that only a small number of patients were receiving a positive diagnosis within six months of onset. Further experiences from the charity sector suggest that a majority of patients have to wait for more than a year, and a significant number for many years, before they receive a diagnosis. That means that patients are being dismissed and stigmatised further and, more importantly, are not then receiving the care and support that they need. Does the Minister have any plans to create a care pathway for people with ME to ensure that patients are given access to the care and treatment they require in a timely manner?

In addition, has the Minister made any assessment of the effects that ME, and the delay in diagnosis of it, have on women in particular? I find it incredibly illuminating that 75% of patients with ME are women. That leads me to believe that there is an issue of women’s pain being dismissed and not taken seriously by healthcare professionals. Will the Minister consider that issue in his response?

It is therefore clear that more training is required, not only for healthcare professionals but for welfare assessors. A survey by Action for ME found that 79% of survey respondents disagreed with the statement that their assessor had sufficient expertise of their condition to conduct an assessment effectively and appropriately. Symptoms of ME can fluctuate so much and are often invisible, as we have heard, so the condition is difficult to manage for patients and, it has to be said, difficult for welfare assessors to detect.
A patient may perform well during a welfare assessment, but an assessor will not see how long patients rested in order to perform tasks during the assessment, or how long it took for them to recover afterwards. As we know, the onerous and ill-conceived assessment process can result in not only an inaccurate award, but an exacerbation of ME symptoms, which can result in a long-term deterioration of the individual’s health. Has the Minister had any conversations with his ministerial colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions on that matter?

From this excellent debate, it is clear that the majority of issues that arise from ME do so because the condition is so little understood. The Government should consider funding research into ME to further our understanding of the condition. The hope is that that would, in time, improve perceptions of ME and improve the routes to diagnosis, care and treatment.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I shall start where everyone else has started and thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who secured this important debate, very much. She did so along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), who has to be in her constituency today to deal with a royal visit—lucky her.

Raising awareness of this debilitating condition is critical, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West has undertaken significant work in this area over a number of years. Thirteen—lucky for us—Back Benchers spoke in today’s debate. I counted 25 Members present at our peak, which is excellent. I spend a lot of time with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in Westminster Hall, it must be said, but that is a lot of MPs for a Tuesday afternoon, let alone a Thursday afternoon, so that is excellent.

As we have heard, ME, otherwise known as chronic fatigue syndrome, is an incapacitating condition with a plethora of symptoms, primarily characterised by long-term fatigue, chronic pain and post-exertional symptoms of malaise, to name but a few. There are many more and we have heard some excellent testimony of those from Members on behalf of their constituents.

As so many have said, the underlying causes of the condition, which for brevity I will call ME, are still poorly understood. There is no one diagnostic test to identify it, and although some people can and do improve and recover, there is currently no cure. That is a hard reality to face. Although the severity of symptoms and therefore the impact vary, ME can lead to poor attendance and affect outcomes at school for young people. I have a constituent in exactly that position with whom I am in regular correspondence—I will not name her but she knows who she is and I wish her and her mum well. ME can result in significant or indefinite time off work or job loss in adults; reduction or complete cessation of daily activities, which can lead to isolation and strain within families and the breakdown of marriages; and overall poor quality of life. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said, it can lead to almost no life for some people and their loved ones.

I am surprised that other than the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), nobody mentioned “Unrest”. I know it well. Some constituents came to see me to tell me about the film. It had screenings in Winchester and Chandler’s Ford in my constituency, which were oversubscribed—packed to the gunwales—and there was not a dry eye in the house. I pay great tribute to Jennifer and her partner Omar who made that film. I am sure there were times when it gave Jennifer’s life a great purpose, but I am sure there were times when she wanted to say, “Get that bleeping camera out of my life!” There is a touching moment at the very start of the film when she says that when she was a young girl, she wanted to eat the world “whole”, because she wanted to see it all and do it all. That went to the heart of her great disappointment that she was so sick.

Jennifer set out very clearly and movingly the sheer ups and downs of this condition. For some, it is almost a constant down. I was struck by watching her at the Princeton University reunion day, during the rather surreal procession through the streets by old boys and girls from Princeton. She so enjoyed seeing old friends that day and looked full of life, but within an hour of it finishing she was absolutely poleaxed on the floor, saying that she felt her eyes were being pushed out of her head from the inside. It was horrible to watch.

It was interesting how the film moved around the different wild and crazy treatments that are out there on the internet. If hon. Members google any condition, they will see lots of wild and crazy treatments, but that is particularly the case with ME. One of the saddest things in it, although it covered it well, was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made. One million—lucky the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) raised of the suicides resulting from this condition.

Millions Missing was mentioned by many Members, and I see some people wearing T-shirts in the Public Gallery. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) is right that it has had some bad PR, but it is the advocate and the people who suffer from this debilitating disease; I was anthropomorphising the actual disease itself. I stole the words of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) when we pitched this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, because he was not in Westminster Hall at the time.

Stephen Pound: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I was not implying any absence of PR skills on the part of the advocates and the people who suffer from this debilitating disease; I was anthropomorphising the actual disease itself. I stole the words of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) when we pitched this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, because he was not in Westminster Hall at the time.

Steve Brine: That is so unlike the hon. Gentleman. Good clarification.

The stigma quite rightly has been mentioned by pretty much everyone who have spoken today. We recognise that people with ME have encountered significant stigma, in part due to the unfavourable media representations of the condition that not only go back to the 1980s but have continued in recent times. I have seen a clip of Ricky Gervais in one of his otherwise amusing stage shows, when he says of ME, “Yes, that’s the one
they say I don’t want to go to work today.” Ricky Gervais is a very talented comic, but given that he is quite active on Twitter, perhaps he could retract that and apologise to the ME community today. Perhaps he could put #ME so we can look out for it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a very good point about mental health; it is totally wrong and insulting to say it is all in the head, but it also goes against the grain of what we are talking about in modern-day healthcare: the parity between mental and physical health. There must be a parity, and to suggest that that somehow lessens it is wrong. His intervention was timely and good.

The physical impacts of the condition have an impact on mental health, as other hon. Members have said. I am also the Minister with responsibility for cancer, so I speak in lots of debates in Westminster Hall and we talk about the mental health impact of cancer. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) knows all about them. A recent example was when we talked about the mental impact of blood cancer. People with ME often report that the legitimacy of their symptoms has been questioned by family, friends, employers, healthcare professionals—yes—and society as a whole. Lest hon. Members did not understand it from my opening remarks, let me clear that Ministers—especially this one—are not among that group of people.

That stigma can and does play a part in the development of the co-morbid symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly for young people—I will come on to them in a minute—who keenly feel the consequences of the resultant social isolation at that moment of their development. As we have heard, suicide is not unheard of. We know that those who experience stigma often also experience discrimination, which has a profound negative effect on their lives. That is unacceptable, so I welcome the debate as a forum to raise awareness of ME and talking about it. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mentioned that MND is being talked about, and he is absolutely right. He is a very good communicator, and I think this will probably be one of his next Facebook Live sessions.


Steve Brine: He is nodding. It is important that we raise awareness and educate people, including me, about the condition and its impact on people’s lives.

I will now turn to the two issues that have primarily been debated today, research and treatment. On research, the Government invest more than £1.7 billion a year in health research via the National Institute for Health Research and the Medical Research Council through UK Research and Innovation. The NIHR and MRC welcome high-quality applications for research into all aspects of CFS and ME, which would certainly include the biomedical research that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West spoke about in her opening remarks.

Since 2011, the MRC has funded seven projects on CFS/ME totalling £2.62 million, and it is ready to support further applications of the highest scientific quality, which is required to make those scientific breakthroughs. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) is no longer in his place, but he spoke about the Norwich Research Park—didn’t he push that a few times?—which sounds very promising. I look forward to hearing more about it, and I feel certain that he will tell me.

The MRC has had an open cross-board highlight notice on ME since 2003. It was updated in 2011 alongside a bespoke funding call in that year. ME research remains an area of high strategic importance for the MRC. Applications that focus on the understanding of the mechanisms of ME are encouraged, with priority areas including immune dysregulation—[Interjection.] Sorry, I am distracted by someone shouting about stopping something outside—I think he is saying, “Stop ME!”.

The priority areas include pain, improved sub-pheno-typing and stratification of ME, and mechanisms of ME in children and young people.

A number of people mentioned the late Baroness Jowell. I was very privileged to meet her. I did so just the once, but I was left in no doubt about her resolve on the issue of brain tumours. Let me say in reference to her and to the research environment that, as my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), reminded me, that journey started around the time of a Westminster Hall debate. Perhaps that is a good sign.

Our challenge with brain tumour research is the lack of high-quality research proposals that have come forward. The late Baroness Jowell was passionate about stimulating the research community to get that situation changed, and we have latched on to that. That is one of her great legacies. I would hazard a guess that her greatest legacy is yet to be reached, but that is one reason it is important to mention her today.

The NIHR has, since 2011, provided £3.37 million of funding for projects and training on ME. That might not be termed biomedical research, but as with other disorders, given that the cause and mechanisms of the condition are still poorly understood, it is important that we carry out both biomedical research, to further our understanding, and and applied health research, to improve the treatment offered to people with ME now and to help to improve their symptoms and quality of life.

The NIHR and the MRC recognise that ME is a debilitating condition and are working with the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative, which was mentioned towards the end of the debate, and with patient representatives on how best they can support a joined-up approach to encourage high-quality research into this complex disorder. I mentioned that Baroness Jowell is a good example of how to start such research. They hope to be able to update colleagues on those discussions by the end of the year, and I for one will look keenly for that update.

For Members who do not know about that important collaboration, it was set up in 2013 to promote high-quality basic and applied research into ME. The CMRC brings together researchers, major funders and charities, and provides them with a mechanism for working together in a co-ordinated and collaborative way, increasing awareness of ME in the research community—that is so important if we are going to stimulate applications—highlighting priorities for research funding and increasing such funding. Both the NIHR and the MRC sit as observers on the CMRC board.
Everyone who contributed to the debate spoke passionately, but the hon. Member for Ealing North spoke particularly passionately, and I liked his point about humanity. This is a matter of good Christian humanity in many ways.

The Royal College of General Practitioners oversees GP training in England. It provides an online course for GPs and other primary care practitioners that includes an overview of the presentation, diagnosis, assessment and ongoing management of ME. The course highlights common misconceptions about ME and considers the challenges that surround that complex condition for patients, carers and primary care professionals. It is produced as part of the METRIC study, which is funded by the NIHR.

Of course GPs can always know more and learn more, but let me speak up for them for a moment. They are called “general practitioners”. Be a GP for a day—it is incredibly difficult to know everything about everything and to be a master of all. General practice is, though, where most patients with ME are likely to be managed, certainly in the first instance. The condition is identified as a key area of clinical knowledge in the RCGP applied knowledge test content guide. The AKT is a summative assessment of the knowledge base that underpins general practice in England and a key part of GPs’ qualifying exams.

Although I understand hon. Members’ points about raising awareness among medical professionals, and as a result of the debate I will redouble my efforts to do that as part of my role as Minister for primary care, all GPs certainly should be aware of ME, and should maintain their clinical knowledge of it and other conditions, as part of their commitment to continuing professional development. Indeed, I have resolved—I have already sent a note to myself—to send a copy of the report of the debate to Professor Helen Stokes-Lampard, who currently leads the RCGP, and to ask for the college’s latest thinking about this subject.

Before any medical condition can begin to be treated, it must be diagnosed. That goes to the heart of our challenge. As the symptoms of ME often resemble those of many other debilitating illnesses—we heard about Lyme disease—there is no test with which to make an accurate diagnosis. ME, therefore, is not always easy to diagnose, to put it mildly. Diagnosis relies on clinical observation of symptoms by healthcare professionals. We understand that that can be frustrating, to put it mildly, for patients—and, it must be said, for their clinicians.

People with ME should be referred to a specialist service, where care should be based on their needs, on the type, complexity and severity of their symptoms, and on the presence of co-morbidities. That decision should be made jointly by the patient and their healthcare professionals. As the shadow Minister said, referral to specialist ME care should be offered within six months of presentation to people with milder symptoms, within three to four months of presentation to people with moderate symptoms, and immediately to people with severe symptoms. Clinicians are responsible for advising patients about available treatment options.

Of course I am aware that access to services for those with severe ME is a big and ongoing issue. Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the configuration of services is a matter for local NHS commissioners, who have to be best placed to deliver services for their area. A number of Members referred to the report of the chief medical officer’s independent working group on ME, which was published in 2002, and a central investment programme of £8.5 million was established to address the service gaps across England—I am responsible for the NHS in England. That included the establishment of 13 centres of expertise across the country, 36 multidisciplinary community teams for adults and 11 specialist teams for children and young people, and facilitation of access to advice on clinical management for patients, families and health professionals.

Linked to that—the Department is, of course, now called the Department of Health and Social Care—the vast majority of people with severe ME and their families will come into contact with social care services at some point. The Care Act 2014 requires a local authority to carry out a needs assessment where an adult or carer appears to have care and support needs. The local authority must then decide whether the person has eligible needs by considering the outcomes they want to achieve, their needs, and how those impact on their overall wellbeing. Where a person is assessed as having eligible care and support needs, those must be met by their local authority.

Let me say some more about children and young people, who were mentioned by a number of Members. There is a powerful moment in “Unrest” where a young lady is celebrating her birthday. She says, “I remember my 16th birthday in this bed, and my 17th birthday, and my 18th birthday”—and she goes on through; I think she was celebrating her 22nd birthday in the film. Although access to services was raised, I know that access to education is also a huge issue for children and young people with ME.

All schools have a legal duty to make arrangements to support pupils with a medical condition in school. Guidance to schools states that they should put in place arrangements that show an understanding of how medical conditions affect a pupil’s ability to learn and give parents and young people confidence in the school’s ability to provide effective support for their condition. Children and young people with ME should have an individual healthcare plan, which should normally be drawn up in partnership with the school, healthcare professionals, parents and the young person, and should be tailored to their needs.

Schools and other services should work together to ensure that children and young people with ME receive an education that is flexible and appropriate. That could mean programmes of study that rely on part-time attendance, in combination with alternative provision or home schooling, which was mentioned. Consideration should also be given to how children and young people are integrated back into school after a period of absence, when they are feeling better and, hopefully, more able physically to cope.

A lot was said about NICE guidelines, which are clearly a sensitive topic and a source of much unhappiness among Members and the wider ME community. According to NICE guidelines, recommended treatments for ME include cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy. I know that many do not agree with those treatments, and we heard powerful testimony about that. The NICE guideline is clear that there is no one form of treatment to suit every patient; that the personal
needs and preferences of the patient should be taken into account; that doctors should explain that no single strategy will be successful for all patients; and that, in common with all people receiving NHS care, ME patients have the right to refuse or withdraw from any part of their treatment that they do not agree with or they think is doing them harm.

As we heard, the NICE guideline is being updated—a jolly good job, too. NICE will look at the current evidence base, including the PACE trial, which has been debated at length in the House before. Of course, we welcome NICE’s decision to undertake a full review of ME guidelines. Many of the ME charities we have heard about today are registered to take part in the guideline development process, but NICE is the independent expert body responsible for developing robust, evidence-based guidance for the NHS to design services that are in line with the best available evidence, and no one should hide from the evidence. It would be inappropriate and wrong for Ministers to interfere with the process, but I feel sure that NICE will be listening to the debate and taking a keen interest in it.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister has rightly said that any patient has the right to withdraw from medical treatment. However, when the DWP is saying that patients must undertake graded exercise therapy, and when health insurance companies are saying that they must undertake graded exercise therapy, it puts the patient in a very difficult position.

Steve Brine: I fully appreciate that point—the hon. Lady put it on the record very well earlier—which takes us on very neatly to welfare benefits.

The hon. Members who requested the debate also flagged the issue of benefits. I know they would like, and are having, an ongoing conversation with the DWP. I am clearly not a DWP Minister—they wanted a Health Minister to respond to the debate, and that is what they have. The DWP obviously recognises that ME is a real and disabling condition. Entitlement to benefits depends on the disabling effects of the condition, which of course must be taken on an individual basis. When assessing claimants, healthcare professionals are expected to be mindful of the fact that many illnesses—including ME—produce symptoms that vary in intensity over time, and they are instructed not to base their opinion solely on the situation observed at the assessment. The DWP assures me that all healthcare professionals are required to read an evidence-based protocol on ME as part of their training, as well as engaging in a programme of continuing medical education that includes modules on the condition.

From what I have heard today, Members clearly feel that that is not happening—certainly not in a consistent way. I will take an action from the debate to send a copy of what has been said to the relevant Minister—I believe it is the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton)—at the DWP. However, I encourage members of the all-party group to seek more and continuing engagement with the DWP on this issue. I will certainly follow that up with them.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, who opened the debate, and her colleagues who secured the debate through the Backbench Business Committee for raising the issues of ME research and treatment on behalf of those affected—their constituents and mine. I welcome this and all other opportunities to raise awareness within the House. Ultimately, raising awareness is what we can do, and that can lead to action and real change, as we saw within the brain tumour community.

I thank the ME charities—they are very active in my part of the world, in Hampshire—for their continuing work in this area. What has been fascinating today, as always with debates in my portfolio, is that I have not heard one single person mention their party political colours. There really is no politics in ME, and nor should there be. I want to see us come together at our true, cross-party best to focus on the needs of people with ME and see if we can move the research agenda forward in this area.

I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said in her opening remarks that professionals should welcome research, because evidence-based treatment is ultimately the basis of their training. I welcome such research. I echo what has been said, and on the email that she read out earlier—clearly, I have not seen it and have only heard her reporting of it; I think she will give it to me afterwards—I hope that that will be the second apology received as a result of my remarks today. I look forward to being copied into that.

As I said earlier, the NIHR and MRC are speaking to the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative and patient representatives about how they can best support a joined-up approach to high-quality research into this complex disorder. I hope they will update colleagues about those discussions later in the year. I will end with what Jennifer said right at the end of “Unrest”: “every book I read...said, ‘when you fall ill, either you...find the cure or die trying.’ It always ends in triumph or tragedy. But that’s not my story—at least not yet.” That is how she put it.

4.14 pm

Carol Monaghan: I thank hon. Members once again—Thursday afternoon is not an easy time to stay behind for a debate, and I really appreciate the fact that they have done so. I also appreciate the great support from the people in the Public Gallery, many of whom are living with ME. It has been tough enough for us to sit here for three hours, so it must have been a hard slog for them. I hope they do not feel the impact of the debate too badly over the next few days.

I have been following the debate on Twitter, and it has been interesting to see the messages of support coming in for individual Members. People really are watching and were interested and encouraged by what they heard. Although we are talking about treatment and diagnosis in the UK, the repercussions are far wider. Messages of support have been coming in from Norway, Canada, the United States and right across Europe. ME affects people worldwide, and I hope the debate has given them some hope.

The debate was about more than just raising awareness. Members asked specific questions, and I am glad the Minister said that he would work with the DWP to
draw up guidelines for people with ME. We will all watch that with interest, and perhaps some parliamentary questions will go in as a result.

I was also a bit disappointed. The Minister, who is a compassionate person, talked about funding, and I think he said that the Medical Research Council is putting £2.6 million into ME research. Unfortunately, that is not for biomedical research—or little of it is. I quickly googled and found that a new research programme is taking place at Bath University, but, once again, it is at the department of psychology. That is where we have the trouble: it is not a psychology department that needs to be doing research, but a medicine or biomedical sciences department.

Members have spoken passionately on the ME community’s behalf, and once again I thank everyone here this afternoon. I do not see this as the end. The fight for people with ME both here and across the world continues.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House has considered myalgic encephalomyelitis treatment and research.

4.17 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 25 June 2018

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Football: Safe Standing

4.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I remind Members that the House has agreed, in its resolution on matters sub judice, that cases that are active before the courts should not be referred to in debate. There is currently a case involving six people who have been charged with offences relating to responsibility for the Hillsborough tragedy. That case and the individuals concerned may not be referred to in today’s debate.

As right hon. and hon. Members can see, this is a very heavily subscribed debate. I am therefore imposing a three-minute speaking limit and suggest that interventions are not made.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 207040 relating to Football: Safe Standing.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to open this debate on what is clearly an incredibly important issue for football supporters across the country. The petition was launched by supporter Owen Riches and calls for football supporters across the country to introduce safe standing.

As right hon. and hon. Members can see, this is a very heavily subscribed debate. I am therefore imposing a three-minute speaking limit and suggest that interventions are not made.

I represent Yate in South Gloucestershire and my local club, Yate Town football club, was the first in the UK at which supporters watched from rail seats in 2011. Our country has both a glorious heritage and an enduring past in football ground safety. It is therefore vital that we debate the issue with the respect it warrants. Concerns about introducing safe standing have stemmed from genuine efforts to guarantee and uphold supporters’ safety and wellbeing.

Standing was common practice at football grounds across the country until Lord Justice Taylor’s recommendations were accepted on following the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. The findings from the final report in 1990 have shaped supporter safety ever since, and from August 1994 clubs in the English premier league and championship have been required to have all-seater stadiums. This matter remains complex and sensitive, but the debate’s purpose is to explore safe standing in a modern era and new climate of technological advancements.

As football clubs’ capabilities and technology to enhance the security and safety of supporters have evolved, there have been renewed calls for an examination of safe standing options. Paramount in the debate is maintaining supporter safety. Concerns about introducing safe standing have stemmed from genuine efforts to guarantee and uphold supporters’ safety and wellbeing.

Lord Justice Taylor remarked in his 1990 report: “There is no panacea which will achieve total safety and cure all problems of behaviour and crowd control. But I am satisfied that seating does more to achieve those objectives than any other single measure.” It is therefore right that the Government have asked for clear proof that an alternative could deliver the same levels of stability and safety.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the Taylor report led to no standing areas. He will be aware that Margaret Aspinall, who speaks on behalf of the Hillsborough families, has said that this is a “sensitive time” and that most families of the victims “don’t want standing ever brought back”.

Does he not agree that those views should be given some weight?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting those remarks on the record and commend him for all the work he has done to represent his constituents on this matter.

Rail seating, the most commonly advocated safe standing system, is the method currently operated in all examples of safe standing. It can be found at Celtic Park as well as several top-flight German football clubs. It operates in much the same way as existing seats, with each ticket holder allocated their own seat in the stadium. The rail seating design allows for the seat to be folded and locked upright when necessary, allowing supporters to stand. Each row has a safety barrier, which spectators can hold on to or lean against for stability. Those barriers seek to aid crowd control by keeping groups of supporters separate and restricting movement around the terrace.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On that point, Nick Dale, Grimsby Town football club’s stadium manager, suggests that weight should be given to the argument that safe standing in small areas should be made permissible and licences more freely available to clubs such as Grimsby Town. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point. I will talk later about suggestions from my local football clubs and the mechanisms by which they could be introduced.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case. He referred to rail seating at Celtic Park, which has been in operation since July 2016. Does he agree that, since its installation, there have been no safety concerns whatever and it has been highly successful for the club and its fans?
Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting that point on the record. That highlights the potential for devolution. Importantly, Celtic’s application was just for a change in the type of seating; there was no increase in the number of people in the stands. The density of people at Celtic Park was therefore the same, which is important when we look at safety in that example.

The Football Supporters Federation has consistently argued that the controlling of crowds at football games, as well as crowds’ entry into grounds and the ability to monitor capacity, has drastically improved in the last 10 to 15 years. As the hon. Gentleman alluded to, that may be best evidenced by the fact that Celtic football club has reported that there has been no increase in incidents.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, a broad range of supporters have come to me in favour of rail seating. That includes a 24-year-old female Liverpool fan and a much older male Man United fan, both constituents of mine in Leeds, as well as a Leeds United supporter.

Luke Hall: The hon. Gentleman is right to put his constituents’ comments on the record, which are duly noted and replicated by many Yate Town football fans who have spoken to me on this matter.

As we explore the various arguments, we are tasked with comparing a 30-year period of improvements in supporter safety with the relatively early years in the introduction of safe standing and some of the examples already mentioned. The Government are asking for a long period of time to assess the impact of rail seating.

One solution is to devolve responsibility on safe standing to local authorities, who could in turn take advice from the safety advisory groups, which often consist of a local authority, the police, fire and ambulance services, and other relevant groups. We already trust local authorities to listen to SAGs when making recommendations and decisions on rugby matches, horse-racing events and music concerts. It is argued that there is an opportunity for those bodies to take on a new and enhanced role, with the Government allowing the decision for a club to introduce safe standing to be recommended and determined by authorities already in place.

Ashton Gate is the home of Bristol City football club and Bristol Rugby—the matches are held in the same ground. Yet the ground regulations on standing, for each sport, are in stark contrast to each other. Bristol City football club previously applied to the local safety authority, which would take into account the evidence that will be required before progress can be made. The debate centres on enhancing safety and control. It is about the extent to which devolution is required, and to which we trust local authorities to make the decisions in question—while ensuring that supporters get the best possible match day experience. I would welcome clarification from the Minister of the exact evidence that will be required before progress can be made. I would also welcome her thoughts about whether the sport might be best served by devolving the decisions to local authorities, which might be better placed to consider each application to install safe standing on its individual merits. The matter is one of particular sensitivity to people on all sides of the debate, and I hope that the points that are raised during the debate will receive fair and careful consideration and understanding.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. There will be a three-minute time limit on speeches.

4.42 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I want to thank the chair of the Pompey Supporters Trust, Simon Colebrook, for talking with me about the issue, as well as our excellent shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who has led our party in backing safe standing across the football league. I thank, also, the owner of Portsmouth football club, who has written to me about this important issue today.

In a debate about safe standing in championship and premier league games, Pompey fans will be painfully aware that, despite a prolific history of European and
top division football, not to mention multiple FA cup wins, our club are currently enjoying a short break from the pressures of the premier league. Nevertheless, our time in this country’s top two divisions means that, under current legislation, we are required permanently to remain all-seater. Our club is therefore a prime example of the injustice of the Government’s stance on safe standing, because in reality the issue is not whether to bring safe standing into football grounds; it is already there. When Portsmouth fans travel to the grounds of Bristol Rovers, Peterborough United, Wycombe Wanderers and countless other sides in the football league, they see stadiums where fully licensed standing sections are operated.

Yet back at Fratton Park they have no choice: standing sections are not allowed. That is all because we previously spent more than three seasons in the top two tiers. I must admit that I am puzzled about why the Government think standing becomes safer as the quality of football gets worse. If that is true, Southampton fans should not be made to sit.

Why should divisional status—and historical divisional status, at that—have implications for whether clubs can have standing sections at their grounds? It is nonsensical, and fans in my constituency are understandably frustrated. Listening to supporters is not just a courtesy. It is important for securing the future of the game. Not every fan wants to stand, but nearly every fan I have spoken to wants to have the choice. I implore the Government to trust fans. They know their clubs best.

The Minister is well respected and highly sensible. However, she is a Spurs fan and so, like Pompey fans, cannot stand safely to watch her team; but her colleague, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), can. Why? It is because the legislation is outdated and unjust. Surely, as a fellow victim of the Football Spectators Act 1989, she shares my frustration and that of Pompey fans. I urge her not to review the issue—which many fans consider to be shorthand for ignoring it—but to listen to fans, listen to common sense and change the law.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): As the hon. Gentleman suggested, Cheltenham Town football club is in league two, and therefore we have safe standing. Does he agree that it will be regrettable if, when the time comes and the club is catapulted into the premier league, it has to rip out the safe standing? That would be to snub some of its most loyal and passionate supporters.

Stephen Morgan: I could not agree more.

Opportunities for any Government to do something that an overwhelming majority of people want, and that will boost community assets and generally make people happy—for free—are few and far between. The Government have an open goal. Yet, like a Southampton striker, they have skied it. On behalf of supporters in my constituency I urge the Minister to reconsider and back fans in their call for safe standing across the league.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Members may remove jackets if they wish.

4.46 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I shall try to make some comments while ignoring the taunting of the Portsmouth fan on the Opposition Benches to my right—although it is difficult to ignore. If we want to see who is successful in football, we need only note that Southampton has survived in the premier league again this year, while Pompey languishes somewhere closer to the Sunday leagues.

All-seater stadiums have been required by law since 1994. There were good reasons for introducing them, but I think that now is the time to consider whether we can have safe standing as well as seating. Safe standing has been trialled and is now accepted as being safe. In 2011 the Scottish premier league relaxed its requirement for all-seater stadiums and Celtic, as has been mentioned, now has a safe standing space for 3,000 supporters. Next season, league one team Shrewsbury Town will join Celtic and have its own safe standing area.

The stunning St Mary’s stadium in Southampton has a capacity of more than 32,000. Frequently 32,000 fans attend to watch—unlike at Portsmouth, not far down the road. The Saints moved from the iconic Dell ground in 2000. We used to stand on the terraces until the move to the new stadium. Many football fans want to continue to stand, and Southampton fans are no exception. Fans in the North stand all too often still stand, although by law they should not. That presents the club with a difficult decision about how to police the situation; thus far it has not managed to do it. However, the situation proves that safe standing, even in an environment where there is standing between seats, has been safe for some 18 years at Southampton football club.

A recent survey by the Football Supporters Federation received more than 33,000 responses and discovered that 94% of fans wanted the choice of whether to sit or stand at English Football League matches. Personally, I prefer to sit, which perhaps is an age thing—but not everyone does, and thousands would prefer to stand. That said, if safe standing can be introduced we must not lose sight of the fact that there are those who want to sit.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that it has become very expensive to attend football matches, and standing areas might allow cheaper access to football for genuine fans?

Royston Smith: I think that has been said—that it may be cheaper if tickets are sold for standing. I have no evidence of it, but there is no reason why it should not be part of the mix.

As a Southampton fan, I am no stranger to nail-biting finishes to the premier league, and last season was no exception. I am not especially vocal, although by all accounts people with offices near mine could hear me shouting my relief when we managed to stay in the premiership for at least one more season—which Portsmouth, of course, failed to do. Many people are vocal and spectators at football like to sing, chant and explain to the referee when he may need to review a decision or change his glasses. That is part of the enjoyment of the match.

There are laws that are made for good reason—goodness knows, this law was made for good reason; no one could deny that—but that, in their implementation, do not always work in the way they were intended. This is one such law, and I am pleased that the Minister is open-minded about changes. With safety as the top priority, of course, I hope that a compromise can be reached to accommodate everyone.
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I will start with a fact: standing happens at every football match, whether that is legal standing up the pyramid to league one or the blind eye turned to it in the premier league and the championship. Every match-going fan knows that away from home they will stand whether they want to or not, and they know the areas of their own ground where stewards will let it go. The choice before us is not between football fans standing and not standing; it is a question of how to make it safe and as enjoyable as possible. The rules are out-of-date and we need our Government to act.

It is clear from the turnout how many MPs this campaign has reached. I was pleased to host an event on this important issue for the Football Supporters Federation, safety experts and parliamentary colleagues before today’s debate. Safe standing is an issue whose time has come, a fact borne out by the simple numbers. It is borne out by its successful use outside the top two flights week in, week out. It is borne out by the 94% of fans surveyed by the EFL, who made it clear that they wanted a choice in the type of match day experience they had. It is also borne out by the more than 100,000 football fans and supporters who signed the petition to secure today’s debate. Fans want safe standing even if they do not want it for themselves, and it is increasingly clear that clubs want safe standing, too.

I was delighted that earlier this month my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) announced that the Labour party backs safe standing. I salute her leadership on the issue.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) made that announcement in my constituency, at Queens Park Rangers. I am blessed to be probably the only MP whose borough has three top-flight football clubs: my club Fulham, Chelsea and QPR. We hope to see QPR also in the premiership quite soon, making it clubs: my club Fulham, Chelsea and QPR. We hope to see QPR also in the premiership quite soon, making it three out of three. There are two questions to be asked here. Can standing be made safe? Yes, it can. Is it safe at all? That is why my hon. Friend is right to do it; we should let our clubs and fans get hold of it and catch up, because they are out of step with public opinion. Two weeks ago the Minister, in response to multiple written questions I had tabled, said:

“An announcement will be made shortly.”

I hope we hear today when that announcement might be.

The crucial thing, from my own experience, is that match-going fans want safe standing to be part of the mix. I have been one of them for 30 years; I will confess to my constituents, although it is not a secret, that I am a Manchester City fan rather than a Nottingham Forest or Notts County fan.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend gives me support from a sedentary position. I am very grateful for it. I have been going for 30 years and I have been a season ticket holder for the last 20. Not long ago, I moved from an area where there was a weekly pitched battle between fans and stewards about standing up, because it stopped being fun. My instinct is not to break rules—funnily enough, I suspect that is the case for everybody here—but I had to stand because people in front of me stood. The stewards, who are often on low wages and just doing their job, have to try to manage an impossible situation. That is no fun for anybody. Anyone who thinks that the current, arbitrary rules on standing are being enforced is kidding themselves. It is a muddle that pleases nobody.

I want to briefly address Hillsborough, because it is exceptionally important and I would hate to think that any of my campaign activities would ever, even inadvertently, cause pain for those families. I rang Spirit of Shankly to talk about the issue. I learned a lot from my conversation with Jay McKenna and I am grateful for it, but what I took from that conversation was his suggestion that we let Merseyside MPs talk about the views and experiences of Merseyside fans. That seemed reasonable to me and that is what I will do. As might be expected, I have talked to Nottingham Forest fans about it; I have spoken at length with both Forza Garibaldi and the Nottingham Forest Supporters Trust. Both are supportive, some because they want to stand and others because they are sick of people standing in front of them.

I will conclude by saying that these calls for safe standing are not only rooted in what fans want, but based on engagement. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting had an incredible event with 40 different clubs represented. The calls are based on research and an understanding of the reality in the stands week in, week out, that the default is not good enough and that we have to change. They make a compelling case for choice, not for a one-size-fits-all approach. We do not need Whitehall to tell us what to do at Meadow Lane or the City Ground. We should let our safety advisory groups do it; we should let our clubs and fans get hold of it and come up with something sensible and safe, because our game would be better for it.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), who opened the debate.

In recent years, the call to change the requirements for all-seater stadiums has become louder and louder. People look at the change of culture within football and the environment within the grounds, which has lost much of its more troubling element, and see an opportunity to return to some standing, whether in the form of terracing or a variation of safe standing.

The overwhelming response that the English Football League received on this issue reflects why we need to change the existing arrangements. In just two weeks, the English Football League received 33,000 responses to its survey on the issue, with 94% being in favour of a choice between seating and standing. That shows the level of interest in changing the current situation and also that fans overwhelmingly support having the option to stand. It is not a marginal decision to have that option, but an overwhelming one.

At the end of last season, Bolton Wanderers just about held on to their position in the championship by their fingertips. If someone is going through a tense
game, which will determine the future of their club and whether they stay in the championship, they do not want to sit down. They want to be standing up, on their feet, part of the experience and not merely a spectator to it. It is natural for fans to want to stand up and it is reasonable for us to look at the current arrangements, which are not safe for fans when they stand up.

Fans naturally want to be part of things. Just as when we speak and engage in debates in the Chamber, it is better to stand up to engage with people. If someone is at a rock concert and enjoying music, it is much better to stand up and be part of that experience. That is what we must reflect on for football, because it applies just as much, if not more, when someone is viewing a football match. We have examples in Scotland and further afield that demonstrate that a standing option can not only be safe, but give that far better experience for the fans. There will also be less time spent by stewards telling people to resume their seats.

There needs to be a change of mindset that allows a devolution of decision making to enable collaboration between fans, clubs, local authorities and the police, along with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, to ensure the right provision is made at each and every ground. That may be completely different from one ground to another; we have to respect and appreciate the local culture within each football club.

I welcome the debate. We need to listen to the fans. We cannot allow a loss of safety, but we can make the football spectator’s experience far better.

4.57 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I apologise that I may not be able to stay for the end of the debate and the winding-up speeches, because I will need to be in the Chamber.

I am a huge admirer of Brentford football club in my constituency, just around the corner from where I live, although I cannot call myself a football fan and I do not go regularly to football. On the occasions I have been, I have stood on the terraces there and have enjoyed the experience very much, but I recognise that, after the tragedy of Hillsborough, those terraces are no longer appropriate for the 21st century.

When the 2018-19 season kicks off in August, Brentford football club will be the only club in the championship with standing terraces. In June 2018 the club received special dispensation to continue standing terraces for another season, given that they have started construction work on their new 17,250-seater stadium near Kew Bridge in my constituency. The chief executive of Brentford football club, Mark Devlin, recently said:

“It is clear to us from our discussions with supporters that Brentford fans want the option to stand to watch their football. New stadiums, and even older grounds like Griffin Park, are now very safe places to attend matches. Safety is paramount whenever we hold a game, procedures are rigorous and all our staff are highly trained.”

Brentford will support the Stand up for Choice campaign and would like to be given the chance to gather evidence to inform the debate when they move to the new stadium. They want the change of legislation. They have seen the rail seats, I have seen the rail seats, and I now understand the difference between rail seats and the old-fashioned terraces. There are other clubs around Europe that already have standing areas that we can learn from.

Brentford fans are used to standing, so the education process for fans would be minimal. Brentford have designed a brand new, purpose-built stadium, ready to accommodate dual-purpose seating. They are willing to put in the very latest rail seats to become an effective pilot for standing.

Brentford need a quick decision on this, because of the cost of the rail seats and the project planning for the new stadium. The west stand provides a number of different options and they want to get on with it. They are working closely with the Football Supporters Federation and other groups to understand best practice on safe standing from all clubs and how to work together to deliver it.

The operations team at Brentford is well used to managing standing audiences and already working on detailed operations policies and procedures, including for managed, zoned areas to restrict the amount of movement within a stand or specific rail seat allocation to ensure that all concourses and exits are managed safely at all times. On behalf of the Brentford fans, I would like the Government to support safe standing.

5 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) for putting the case for safe standing so clearly. This is a day for huge congratulations to all the fans who have made that case and lobbied with such passion, thoughtfulness and commitment for many years to move the debate to the point that we have reached today.

The first Middlesbrough match I ever went to was a thrilling 0-0 draw with Wimbledon on 26 October 1996. I was hooked. That was the year after the Riverside stadium opened. It was one of the first truly modern stadiums to open in the aftermath of the Taylor review and was financed by Steve Gibson, the man who more than any other has come to embody the saving of Middlesbrough football club. Why did the Taylor review happen? We all know the tragic Hillsborough story and the very good reasons why standing was abolished.

However, I returned to the Riverside a few weeks ago to meet a delegation including Middlesbrough’s chief operating officer, Mark Ellis, Chris Joseph from the Middlesbrough Supporters Forum, Rob Nichols from the Fly Me To The Moon fanzine and Dave Roberts, the commentator. We enjoyed a really good discussion on the pros and cons of safe standing, which are actually quite complex. Whether the club would even choose to go ahead with it, were it an option, is not a done deal, given that, in essence, the cost of a ticket would not be reduced. Only one rail seat can be installed in place of an ordinary seat, so there would probably be no change in the cost of a ticket for a fan.

None the less, this comes down to other things, including safety—it is not safe to stand in an all-seater stadium; the trip hazard of a low plastic seat in front of a fan is very real—atmosphere and the fan experience. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), it is simply not sensible to expect people in a highly passionate environment to sit down politely throughout the experience.
Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Several Crewe Alexandra supporters are currently in Russia enjoying the World Cup and are tweeting at me all the time about the atmosphere. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as football fans around the world and in Europe enjoy safe standing, UK fans should be given the same choice?

Mr Clarke: I agree. The case that rail seats work has been well made in Germany over a number of years, so the idea that we would be taking a step into the unknown is simply untrue. We see that this works abroad; indeed, I think most people would say that the atmosphere in German stadiums is better than in ours. The case for safe standing has been made. We will obviously need to consult on this change if we are to make it; it would not be appropriate for us politicians to prejudge all the different aspects of this debate. I hope the Minister will encourage a review of this, because the case deserves sensible consideration.

In that meeting at the Riverside, we watched a really impressive presentation put together by a Bristol City fan. I can certainly obtain it and I urge hon. Members to watch it, because it sets out that case very clearly and emphasises that we are not returning to the bad old days of the ’80s and terraces. This debate is obviously in the shadow of history and it is all too easy to imagine that we are calling for a regressive step, which this is not. It is absolutely about embracing the latest technology.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has actually taken the words about those ’80s terraces right out of my mouth. There is a perception among some that we are going back to crowded terraces with far too many people being admitted. I thank the Huddersfield Town Supporters Association and Stand Up For Town. I was initially very cynical about safe standing, but they taught me about what it involves.

Mr Clarke: I think that that is right, and I absolutely agree that this is something about which we need to listen and learn. The ground has moved.

A favourite story of my family’s is about my grandfather taking my uncle-to-be to watch Hartlepool United in the late ’70s. He famously remarked, “We are probably going to win today; our star striker is back.” My uncle asked, “From injury?” My grandfather replied, “No, from prison.” The days of that sort of culture in football are long gone, as I think the debate has reflected. We have heard Members from across the parties express the families. However, we are debating the introduction of safe standing, which has the support of many fans, and much evidence to support it.

It is also important to look at the technological advancements that have developed since the Taylor report. We have seen the introduction of rail seating in several European stadiums, particularly in Germany. Notably, seats in Borussia Dortmund’s stadium can be locked upright, allowing supporters to stand, and each row has a safety barrier to improve crowd control. Dortmund’s fans have a reputation for being among the most boisterous in the world, so if Dortmund can have good crowd control in a safe standing environment, it sends a clear message to the rest of Europe that those advancements are working.

We must also look at our own stadiums and how they are adapting to the modern game. My recent visits to Old Trafford have involved standing in the singing section, and as somebody said to me earlier today, there is a reason why people stand up in church to sing hymns. The seats in that singing section are not used by anybody, and those fans would be far safer in a raild safe standing area than being hemmed in by tip-up seats. Hon. Members who have visited Wembley stadium will have encountered this problem too, and I am told that the same thing happens at Manchester City’s Etihad stadium, although I am not a frequent visitor to that particular ground. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) says that they would not have me.

Football supporters have made it clear that they want this choice, which is provided at rugby matches, music festivals, horse racing and other events. The Government now need to listen to supporters who, along with clubs and safety experts, want reform of the all-seater legislation.

5.7 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Safe standing has been a somewhat vexed issue for many years; it actually predates the times that hon. Members have talked about. I think back to when I first started getting interested in and following football. Sometimes we do not know why we have done some things, but I decided to become a fan of Coventry City. That was around the time in 1981 when the late, great Jimmy Hill, who was Coventry’s chairman, decided to change the Highfield Road ground in Coventry from being mainly all standing to an all-seater stadium. That was seen as revolutionary at the time. Sometimes we do not like revolution that much in this country, and that decision was quickly found to be very unpopular. The upshot was that the all-seater stadium lasted for approximately two years.

I commend to the Minister a very interesting report released by the University of Leicester’s sociology department in 1984, which actually looked into that experiment and discussed it at some length. While things have moved on greatly since that time, some things in that report are extremely pertinent today. However, we
all know the events that took place following that decision and the deeply distressing disaster at Hillsborough in 1989. Although I do not want to go into the detail of that, when we look at the context of this debate, we need to look carefully at the history and why we went to a system of all-seater grounds in the top two leagues in 1994.

I have been watching football for 30 years and I know that, back then, at many grounds that were all-seater, most people sat down, but there is a challenge now. I take my son to watch Coventry City—some people would think that is a good thing; he seems to enjoy it. When I took him to an FA cup game against Arsenal when he was only eight, he spent 90 minutes standing on a seat because we could not see, and he would not have seen a thing if he had not done so. We went to Brighton this year in the FA cup, and he stood for another 90 minutes. Fortunately, he is nearly as tall as me, which is not that tall, and he managed to see.

The point is that there are large sections of our football grounds where people choose to stand in seating areas, and we should consider that in the context of this debate. I ask the Minister to reflect on that choice that people are making and on whether, as many hon. Members have said, there is another way of doing things, given the more modern technology and the advances that we have made in football over the period from 1989, the time of the Hillsborough disaster, to where we are now.

5.11 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I should start by declaring an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters, as the Football Supporters Federation has been the driving force behind the campaign to allow standing safely at premiership and championship grounds in England and Wales.

I have canvassed the views of football supporters in my constituency of Cardiff Central—it will not be a surprise that many are supporters of Cardiff City, newly promoted to the premiership—through face-to-face discussions and through social media with the different stakeholder groups, such as the supporters club and trust, but also through discussions with Cardiff City directors and senior management. I am delighted that Cardiff City’s operations manager, Wayne Nash, and supporter liaison officer, Adam Gilliatt, are here listening to the debate.

Much of the debate will rightly concentrate on safe standing through rail seating. For those clubs with grounds that can accommodate rail seating, it is an obvious choice to make, but my club, Cardiff City, has taken and will continue to take a different approach to standing safely. Cardiff openly allows standing in designated areas and has published a sixth update to its 2013 report, “Management of Persistent Standing at the Cardiff City Stadium”—I recommend it to colleagues—saying why it believes that the current law does not preclude it from offering standing areas.

Cardiff City has been on what it describes as an incredible journey since the wake-up call that it received in 2001. From a near-bankrupt club, in an antiquated stadium, with management constraints, cultural apathy and infamous supporters, it has been transformed into an award-winning, supporter-friendly business, and our fans have a vastly improved reputation. The club’s success is demonstrated in season ticket sales and other revenues, awards won and record low arrest figures.

We have two famous stands at the City ground: the Canton and the Ninian. The majority of fans in the Canton stand want to stand to watch a match, and the majority in the Ninian want to sit. Since 2013, the club has enabled both things to take place safely by ensuring that any security and service risks are actively and properly managed. The club takes reasonable and proportionate action through stewarding against the tiny minority of fans in the Ninian stand who continue to stand despite it being a seating area. If someone is standing persistently and will not respond to advice from stewards, their seat number is sent to the control room. The identity of the spectator is verified using CCTV and the club’s season ticket database, and they are sent a text message to warn them of the implications of persistent standing.

I have chosen today to focus on Cardiff’s approach to emphasise one specific aspect of the campaign for safe standing. This must be about choice. All clubs want to deliver the best possible experience for supporters and visitors, and to do that by offering a choice.

5.14 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I, too, declare interests as a member of the Cardiff City Supporters Trust and Cardiff City Supporters Club, as an ambassador for the Cardiff City FC Foundation and as someone who has been a fan for 31 years. I have stood and sat at games home and away during that period and I have seen remarkable change. I will be frank: some of the experiences that I had as a youngster going to watch Cardiff games were quite scary, particularly at some of the away matches. I have seen an absolute transformation, not only in the club at home but at away matches, during those 31 years. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) spoke of the incredible journey that Cardiff City has been on, and I absolutely second that. It is why the family stand—the Grange stand—was nominated for and won the best customer experience award at the StadiumBusiness summit in Barcelona in 2011. The same year, the club won the family football club of the year award, and it has won the family club award every year since 2011. In 2018, we won the EFL family club gold award. That shows the transformation that we have been through as a club.

I commend the club for the steps that it has taken in encouraging standing safely. It has commissioned a series of independent reports and has been working with academics and experts. There is a fantastic team at the club. My hon. Friend mentioned Wayne Nash and Adam Gilliatt, who are here today and who have worked with supporters and the relevant authorities to ensure that we can facilitate a differentiated customer experience for all fans, so that everyone can enjoy the matches.

We have referred to the difference that the club facilitates, particularly between the Canton and Ninian stands. That shows that things can be done—that clubs can have different approaches and meet the different needs of fans. A club can introduce proportionate and differentiated responses to ensure that the experience is safe for all involved. The reality is that safe standing already occurs up and down the country. There are
[Stephen Doughty]

many aspects to that success. Examples include ensuring an even spread of fans throughout the stand by checking tickets and stopping that movement towards the back, as we have seen at Cardiff City, ensuring that gangways are kept clear and that fans are encouraged not to overflow into gangways, and looking at issues in stand design—for example, the differences in rake at different stadiums. Our rake is below 25° in all our stands. That enables, I believe, a safe environment. It is obviously not the case at all clubs. People have to look at those issues. There are also the issues of the wideness of seats and seating row depths and the ticketing policy overall and whether stands are being sold to capacity. Of course, safety goes much wider than whether there are seats or no seats. It is about a whole series of other issues, including access points and safety arrangements with the relevant authorities.

All the things that I have mentioned need to be considered by the Government, but fundamentally I very much support the position taken by the Football Supporters Federation. We have already seen the example of the Scottish premiership. We have seen the response in the EFL-FSF survey, with 94% of fans wanting a pro-choice situation. Fundamentally, just as the technology in the EFL-FSF survey, with 94% of fans wanting a pro-choice situation. Fundamentally, just as the technology and the evidence have evolved, so too the Government’s policy needs to evolve. I fully support the campaign.

5.17 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I have taken particular note of the advice that you gave at the beginning of the debate, about what can and cannot be mentioned.

I represent many members of the Hillsborough Family Support Group executive committee. That group represents the majority of the families bereaved at Hillsborough. It has recently considered this matter privately and still opposes standing at football grounds.

As has been mentioned, all-seater stadiums were one of the main recommendations—a really important one—that came out of the final report of the Taylor inquiry, which was the public inquiry designed to establish the cause of the disaster, in which 96 people were crushed to death on the terraces while standing at the Leppings Lane end of the football ground. No one has been crushed to death at a football ground that is all-seater since then in the UK.

That matters to the Hillsborough families. Safety at football grounds is one of the biggest issues for them and has been for almost 30 years. I would say that they have the most locus of anyone. They have opinions, experiences and views that deserve to be heard and taken into account in this debate. However, they cannot say what they think, and why they think it, publicly at this time, and the House will understand why. I cannot engage in the merits of the debate today and the merits of this case, because I cannot say what I think at this time as a result of the sub judice rules to which you have referred, Mr Robertson—quite properly, I might add. I do not believe it is right for the debate to be concluded and for changes to be made to the current arrangements without those affected by the Hillsborough disaster being fully consulted, their voices being heard and their views being considered.

How can it be right that those who have the most to say about this matter cannot publicly say what they think or why, while those who wish to promote the change have no such constraints on them? I do not criticise those who are campaigning for the changes that they want. I congratulate them for the effort and work they have put in, and both Front Benchers for the work that they have done. I criticise nobody. It would be wrong, however, to make changes to the rule without those who have been most affected over the last 30 years having a full say in what those changes ought to be and being able to say fully why they believe what they believe.

I know that it is frustrating for those who have been campaigning to contemplate any kind of delay, but the Hillsborough families have faced frustrations over the last twenty-nine and a half years. I promised my constituents that I would put these points in the debate. I hope that both Front Benchers, whom I commend for their receptiveness to these difficulties, will understand and act on those concerns in a way that ensures that the bereaved families of the 96 can be at the heart of the consideration of this issue, as I would say they must be.

5.20 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). It is an honour for me to represent the constituency of Liverpool, Walton, which is home to our two great football clubs. This issue is of enormous significance to the people in my constituency and my city. The solidarity shown by both clubs, their fans and the city as a whole following the Hillsborough disaster will forever remind us that the power of the people is greater than the people in power. Twenty-nine years later, however, the issue of standing at football grounds sharply divides opinion across the city.

I welcome the Chair’s guidance to hon. Members to avoid commenting on matters that might be considered to have a bearing on the responsibility for what happened on that terrible day in 1989. I simply want to set out briefly the position of those groups that I have met and spoken to the Hillsborough Family Support Group, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood. I have spoken to the Hillsborough Justice Campaign and Liverpool supporters’ groups. It should be noted that the Hillsborough Family Support Group committee asked for this debate to be postponed. I, too, ask for all hon. Members to be vigilant in their contributions. In any event, hon. Members must be mindful that we are having this debate at a time when the families themselves are unable to engage fully and frankly with it.

I will briefly relay the positions of the groups in my constituency that have asked for their views to be heard in this debate. The HFSG position has been set out thoroughly. The Hillsborough Justice Campaign has not taken an official position on standing at football grounds. A spokesman for HJC told me: “Safety will always be paramount to the HJC, but equally so is respecting the choice of supporters. It has never been our role to dictate on wider football issues.”

The Spirit of Shankly supporters union, after consultation with fans, fully supports the introduction of safe standing rail seating at football grounds.
Hon. Members will appreciate that my constituency, like others, is at the heart of this debate. For my part, I ask the House to bear in mind the sensitivities surrounding this issue, particularly for the Hillsborough families and survivors, who have fought so valiantly over the last 29 years in pursuit of truth and justice. Although we now know the truth, the fight for justice goes on to this day.

5.22 pm

Amelie Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I pay tribute in particular to the previous two speakers, my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). They speak from experience and their discussions with people who have been through a huge amount.

I do not want to talk specifically about the principle of safe standing, but an issue related to the design of football grounds that crops up in this general policy area. It is an issue of great importance to supporters at the largest of my local football clubs, Oxford United FC. Oxford United currently plays in League 1 and is hoping soon to move back up into the championship, where it used to play. There are a number of fans at Oxford United who consistently stand. A number of hon. Members on both sides of the House have made that point. From my discussions with the club, it is clear that it is difficult to prevent some of those fans from standing. We have heard interesting examples from parts of the country where that process goes better and from others where it is harder.

In many areas of the country, we are asking stewards—who are relatively low-paid people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said—to carry out a difficult and potentially quite confrontational task, when they have many other activities to conduct at the same time. That is not the case at Oxford United FC, where the stewards are paid the living wage—I am pleased that they are—and where the approach to safety generally is very consistent.

Oxford United wants to put in place a special system of rails in the ground. Known as the Ox-rails method, it involves the erection of rails, independent of the seats, as an additional control measure. That is not on the assumption that everybody will stand—quite the opposite—but it could give additional support to fans who end up standing, thereby hopefully obviating some of the safety problems that have occurred in other places. It also enables banners to be hung on the rails, which is obviously important to a lot of fans.

The Ox-rails approach has been supported by local fans and has largely been supported by the local safety advisory group. The problem is that the club cannot get a guarantee from the Sports Grounds Safety Authority—and, by extension, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—that if it moves up to the championship, it can retain the Ox-rails. I find that pretty ludicrous, because it is a safety measure. If it is good enough for League 1, surely it will be sufficient when the club moves up into the championship, but it cannot get that guarantee.

It is unclear to me what the logic behind that is. From what I can see, the rules for voluntary and compulsory all-seater orders have identical implications for the Ox-rails approach, which is quite a bit fairer than the approaches adopted in some other places, so it would be helpful if the Minister spoke specifically about the Ox-rails method in her response.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I have been contacted by many constituents and by my local football team, the Imps. They all support giving fans a choice on safe standing. Lincoln has one of the highest numbers of respondents in support of this e-petition of any area. A huge proportion of my local community are Imps fans. Weekly games at Lincoln’s Sincil Bank bring our whole community together. The atmosphere is electric.

Lincoln Imps are a club on the up. We were promoted in 2017 to league two and earlier this year, we won the Checkatrade Trophy. We are really proud of that. The managers won the Lincoln civic award, too.

Darren Cowley—an Essex lad, actually—who manages the Imps, has his brother Nicky, who has said many times how struck he is by the allegiance people have to their club and city, and how proud people are to be Lincoln. The bottom line is that communities identify with their football clubs and football connects communities. That is why we have to get it right with safe standing.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Norwich City football club supports safe standing, as do many of the fans. One concern many fans have, however, is that some clubs may use the increase in supply as a cash cow, to generate more money from sales, rather than increase the supply of tickets for those loyal fans, who are currently priced out of many football games.

Karen Lee: Coincidentally, I was just coming to the point that in my view, safe standing spaces should be capped to keep numbers at a safe level. Safe standing zones would then be more safe than they currently are.

Anybody who has been to a football match knows that people still stand in narrow seated areas that are dangerously unsuitable for 90 minutes of standing. That obstructs the view of people who want to sit, which is particularly unfair for children, families and elderly fans. The Lincoln people who have contacted me, like a lot of football fans, believe that they should have the option to stand in safe areas of football stadiums and safety experts support their view.

I believe we should listen to our constituents—the fans—and grant them the choice to support their team in a manner that is safe and preserves that special atmosphere which brings communities together at Sincil Bank and stadiums across the UK. I will be cheeky here and say, “Up the Imps!”

5.28 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. It is always nice when parliamentarians can bring their personal experience to debates. I can bring thousands of hours of lived experience as a Manchester City fan, going back to the ’70s and ’80s, standing and sitting on terraces.

The first point is that nobody wants to go back to those bad old days. I have stood on terraces in the past, in the old days, where I was genuinely fearful for my safety.
There must be no return to poorly managed, overcrowded and badly designed terraces. The football environment, however, has changed. Crowds have changed. Stadium design has improved and we have learnt the lessons of the past. In my view, the standing ban is a 1990s solution to a problem the nature of which has changed in recent years. In my view it is time for change.

There are good reasons for change, including choice. The overwhelming evidence is that fans across the country in almost all clubs support safe standing—it is one of the few things that unite United and City fans in Manchester. Other reasons include the betterment of our national game’s atmosphere and the lack of logic in the current regulations.

None of those reasons would be enough in themselves if safety were compromised in any way, but I agree with many hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who made an excellent contribution, that the key point is that at the moment, in almost every ground in the country, people are standing on terraces designed for sitting, which must be less safe than people standing on terraces designed for standing. When I am at the Etihad, the seat in front of me comes to just about halfway up my shin. I do not stand, but if I did and somebody pushed me, I would tumble straight down on to the person in front of me. It is even worse for people in the steeply raked terraces in the third tier at the Etihad and at St James’ Park. The potential for an accident if people are standing in those sorts of sitting areas is a consideration.

The other point to be aware of is the difficulty of maintaining order and peaceful relationships on terraces. Many hon. Members will have experienced the friction that develops when people who want to sit and people who want to stand are next to each other on the terrace. It cannot be properly managed by the stewards and it is very unsatisfactory for older people, disabled supporters, children and anybody who wants to sit but who ends up on a terrace where the majority stand, as we have heard. That is a big problem at the away end.

Given that the current rules clearly do not make grounds safer, the status quo is no longer justified. I add my voice to the overwhelming number of hon. Members we have heard today, and fans across the country, who say that it is time for change and time for safe standing on our terraces.

5.31 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am proud to represent Burnley, not least because of our fantastic premier league team, the mighty Clarets. Burnley were founding members of the Football League. They finished seventh in the premier league this season, for the first time in 51 years, they will compete in Europe—a tremendous achievement for a town of fewer than 100,000 people. I put on record my thanks to our manager Sean Dyche, the players, the board and everyone at Burnley football club.

On behalf of all Burnley football fans—I must declare an interest because I am a season ticket holder—I support the introduction of safe standing areas. I have been going on Turf Moor since I was six years old and for many years, I stood on the terraces with my dad and brother. The atmosphere was terrific even though, as a little girl, I was regularly lifted off my feet as the crowd surged forward.

It was clearly right that steps were taken to make stadiums safer after the Hillsborough disaster. Now, however, it is time to revisit the issue. It is a fact that many fans prefer to have the option to stand; some fans would like to stand throughout the match and others would like to stand for parts of the action. In all-seater stadiums, the situation is that some fans stand for long periods, which leaves fans behind with no option but to stand as well, so large numbers of fans are standing with no rail to hold on to. In an animated crowd, there is a real chance that fans will fall forward over the seat into the next row, which could create a domino effect that pushes more people forward. It is incredibly dangerous.

Introducing designated safe standing areas with rails would be a sensible option for fans who wish to stand. There are many examples of that, as we have already heard, I would like clubs to be given the right to introduce safe standing areas as part of a package that would include a requirement to ensure that people in seated areas remain seated throughout the game. I would also like clubs to see it as an opportunity for some increased capacity and to offer less expensive match tickets. Football used to be the people’s game, but many people have been priced out. I want to see more families and children enjoying the beautiful game in the certain knowledge that their safety is prioritised.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Because hon. Members have been disciplined, I will relax the time limit on speeches to four minutes, but that change can be reversed.

5.34 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I only wish Scunthorpe United’s finishing was as good as England’s last night. During my time supporting the mighty Iron, they have played in leagues one and two of the Football League, with occasional visits to the championship. When Scunthorpe moved from the Old Showground to the newly built Glanford Park in 1988, it was the first new Football League stadium to be built for 33 years. Home fans have enjoyed standing there for the last 30 years.

An examination of the league one play-offs this season illustrates the problems with the current legislation. Sadly, Scunthorpe lost to Rotherham, who went on to beat Shrewsbury and will play in the championship next season. Rotherham’s ground is an all-seater, so they have no issue with the current law and regulations, but had Shrewsbury been promoted, they would have been able to use their brand new rail-seating area, which was installed in May, for just three seasons. Assuming they stayed in the championship, under the current arrangements, they would then have had the Football Spectators (Seating) Order 2016 served on them, which would have required their ground to provide seated accommodation only. It would have been necessary to replace rail seating with conventional seating in the fourth season. That so-called three-year rule forced Peterborough United to demolish their standing terrace in 2013, despite the fact that the club and the fans wanted to retain it. Needless to say, as many hon. Members have observed, many fans continue to stand in the seated area.

[Jeff Smith]
Had Scunthorpe been promoted to the championship next year, the existing regulations would have meant that over the summer, they would have had to install seating on the terraces that has provided safe standing for thousands of fans for 30 years—clearly nonsensical.

Football fans want a choice between sitting safely and standing safely. The Sports Grounds Safety Authority and safety advisory groups are expected to enforce legislation and regulations that are not viable and have failed. Some fans will always stand. The time is right to review and change the legislation, which was introduced in 1989—an age ago—to try to solve problems that existed then. The right solution is for clubs, along with their local safety advisory group, the police and fans, to be allowed to implement what is safe, risk-assessed and reasonable for their ground. There should be no one-size-fits-all approach.

I support an evidence-based review that will fully involve fans groups such as the Iron Trust, and use the knowledge of people such as John Needham, the Iron Trust’s secretary, and others, who see safety at football grounds as paramount but believe it can be better delivered through rail seating or safe standing.

I hope that the law and relevant regulations will be changed in time for the 2019-20 season, by which time Glanford Park will be going through redevelopment. Hopefully, it will be third time lucky for the mighty Iron and they will be back in the championship. I wish safe standing to continue at Glanford Park, as it has for 30 years.

5.38 pm

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. Now I have four minutes, I can take a bit longer. I have to declare an interest: I was the chairman of Forest Green Rovers. I was then vice chairman until I was re-elected as a Member of Parliament, and standing down from the board was one of the sacrifices that I have had to make. I will make a couple of pertinent points.

I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said, there were concerns at the time about standing at all grounds in the country. Frequently, there was at least a degree of discomfort around it, if nothing else. No one is talking, however, about going back to having that sort of standing in that sort of way. Indeed, I was at Hillsborough on the day of the disaster. I thoroughly understand the views and feelings of survivors, families and friends. We have to respect and understand that.

I did not really read the Taylor report, but I spoke to Lord Justice Taylor after his inquiry. He clearly believed that seating was the safest way, but he did not say that standing was inherently unsafe. We also have to remember that he was dealing with a situation where it was compulsory to have fences around grounds. I hope that that is a very different sort of arrangement from one that anyone is suggesting for the future.

I want to pick up on two points. Other Members have referred to the fact that all-seater stadiums are compulsory in some leagues, but not in every league. If standing is safe in some grounds in some leagues, why is it not safe in others? That point has to be addressed, but I want to speak in particular about standing in seated areas. As well as being a home season ticket holder at Hillsborough, I am also an away season ticket holder, so I have been to most football grounds in the country. Last season, I did not really read the Taylor report, but I spoke to Lord Justice Taylor after his inquiry. He clearly believed that seating was the safest way, but he did not say that standing was inherently unsafe. We also have to remember that he was dealing with a situation where it was compulsory to have fences around grounds. I hope that that is a very different sort of arrangement from one that anyone is suggesting for the future.

We have a situation that is fundamentally discriminatory, because it depends on someone’s size. Women are likely to be smaller than men and therefore have the most problem seeing when stood up in a seated area. As the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) said, children
have the same problem. Whatever the dangers of standing in seated areas, it is really dangerous for children to have to stand on tip-up seats, and that happens. I have taken my godson Dan to games for many years. When he was younger, he had to stand on a tip-up seat. At Charlton one day, a steward came over and said, “Get him sat down. It’s unsafe.” I said, “He will sit down when everybody in front of him sits down, because he cannot see otherwise.” That was at the age of eight, nine or 10, and that problem has to be addressed. Not allowing standing is also discriminatory against people with disabilities. If someone is not disabled enough to go in the disabled area—they might have bad arthritis, a problem with their back or a heart condition—but cannot stand up for 45 minutes, they cannot go and follow their team at an away ground. That is the reality at present. It is discriminatory, and we have to address that.

I hope we can have the discussion. The answer could be rail seating. I had emails recently from Grand Stand Seating Systems, which has another way of looking at the problem. In the end, we have to find a way of having safe standing and safe seating at football grounds so that everyone can enjoy the game they love in the way they want.

5.45 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I will never forget my first proper experience of football. It was Christmas 1989. I remember the anticipation walking through the streets to get to Roker Park. I remember how close I felt to the action once I was inside. I remember the freezing cold wind off the North sea that used to hit me on the terraces. What I genuinely do not remember was feeling unsafe, because I have never felt unsafe in a football ground. I tell that story not because I am nostalgic about the past—I think Members have correctly said that we are not trying to look back to the past in this debate; by the way, there is far too much nostalgia in some of our policy debates in this place—but because it is a reminder of what football is really about. I did not just discover football as an experience that day; I discovered my tribe. Football is about sport, of course, but it is also much more than that. It is about culture, family and identity. That is why it is so special, why it matters and why so many of us are here today when some serious business is going on next door.

It would be wrong to say that such issues as hooliganism and racism, which scarred football in the 1980s, have gone away entirely, but the situation today is fundamentally different. This country is fundamentally different—for the better—from how it was in the 1980s. Most of all, policing is fundamentally different. I am proud to say that my predecessor Lord Pendry of Stalybridge in the Gallery, because I know he tried to influence the Taylor report at the time to allow for safe standing. As shadow sports Minister, I think he tried to introduce a policy similar to the one our current shadow sports Minister has introduced.

Football fans like me would like two things: first, to be treated with respect, and secondly, to have the choice that so many Members have talked about today. If I go to a football match, ideally I would stand if I could, because football is a participatory event. At a music gig—this is not as good an example as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who talked about singing in church—people can be seated at the sides or be in front of the stage standing up. Where is the best place to be? It is standing up, being right in the centre of the gig. I want to jump up and down when we get a chance or a corner, because as a Sunderland fan, you have to take what you can get, frankly. I want to sing songs, I do not just want to go and watch a live version of what we see on TV. I want something different from that. I want to be with my people, sharing in that collective experience.

A lot of people have mentioned the World cup, and how much we are enjoying it so far in this country for once—I have probably jinxed it. It sounds ridiculous, but it is a proven fact that while the World cup is on, suicides decline in participating countries. That is not because a country is doing particularly well or badly, but because that shared experience is genuinely good for people. There is a book called “Soccernomics” that looks through some of the data around football. That fact is also true for big collective events, such as when Princess Diana died or when JFK was assassinated. The shared experience makes the game what it is. It is why I can sit next to my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is a Newcastle fan. The derby games are so important for that.

In terms of the practicalities, people can stand up and watch horse racing or rugby, or football in Germany and now in Scotland. They can stand up and watch football in the lower divisions. It seems particularly egregious that league one clubs that have been promoted and sustained that success have to remove their standing areas. In reality, as so many Members have said, people stand up at matches anyway. That is particularly so for away matches, which are by far and away the best way for someone to watch their team. We need to look at the law, and we need to change things. We need to consider just how far we have come from the 1980s and celebrate what football means for this country. Most of all, we need to give football fans the respect and choice that they deserve.

5.49 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I remember going to the football with my dad when I was a child, holding on to his hand as we headed for the terraces, wearing our team’s colours, laughing and joking with other fans, and the whole stadium would be standing cheering the team on throughout the match. The excitement and the atmosphere were electric. Everyone should be able to enjoy supporting their team, whether standing or sitting.

Having heard Huddersfield Town Supporters Association’s views about safe standing last summer, the demand and support for the campaign has become more and more apparent. My local team, Huddersfield Town football club, is the first premier league club to survey season ticket holders about standing tickets, and 96% of those who responded were in favour. The Premier League’s research shows that 70% of people surveyed are in favour.

There are times during matches when the whole crowd are already on their feet, but, as stadiums are seating only, no safety precautions such as rail bars are currently in place. We have had tragedies in our stadiums.
where safety has failed, and we must never forget the victims and their families. Technology, design and safety standards have moved on since then, and our stadiums are hopefully safer for it.

Standing at sporting events happens across the country. Teams such as the Leicester Tigers, who are in the rugby union premiership, still have terraces where fans can enjoy the thrill of cheering on their team without being confined to a seat. Further afield, there is evidence of effective safe standing practice. In Germany, the Bundesliga team Borussia Dortmund has a stadium that has a rail between each row of seats, and there have been very few incidents or accidents since they were introduced. The solution is simple: if there is sufficient evidence that standing can be safe and fans are in support, it should be introduced. I would argue, however, that it should not be enforced across the whole stadium but in designated parts, as some people would prefer or need to be seated and it would not be fair on those fans if they had people standing in front of them.

We need to catch up with practices in Europe and deliver on an energetic but safe environment for spectators. They are integral to their clubs and should have their voices heard. Let us make sure that a generation of children can experience the excitement and enjoyment of standing at a football game, as I had the opportunity to do with my dad.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I call Gerald Jones.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I have a confession to make. When the idea of safe standing was introduced, I would argue, however, that it should not be enforced across the whole stadium but in designated parts, as some people would prefer or need to be seated and it would not be fair on those fans if they had people standing in front of them.

We need to catch up with practices in Europe and deliver on an energetic but safe environment for spectators. They are integral to their clubs and should have their voices heard. Let us make sure that a generation of children can experience the excitement and enjoyment of standing at a football game, as I had the opportunity to do with my dad.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry; my voice did not carry. Gerald Jones.

Hilary Benn: I am terribly sorry. [Laughter.]

5.53 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I started having an identity crisis there, Mr Robertson. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as we debate the e-petition on allowing premier and championship football clubs to enable safe standing. I will be brief because I know other Members want to speak. May I say at the outset that I am not a typical premier football supporter? However, I am a season ticket holder at Merthyr Town football club and enjoy spending time watching home games at that club and supporting the many activities that it organises in our community. Whatever the outcome of the current discussions, any decision on safe standing will have no direct impact on supporters at Penydarren Park, Merthyr Tydfil—at least until they graduate to the premiership in the perhaps not too distant future—or at any other clubs in my constituency. Many people from my constituency travel to support premier and championship matches, and my contribution to today’s debate reflects my conversations with them. [SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

As we know, there has been much in-depth consultation with football clubs, fans and safety authorities, and the outcome of that consultation suggests it is time for change, as recognised by Labour’s recent policy announcement. I share the view that it is important to give the power to fans and clubs, in consultation with and with guidance from local safety authorities, to allow safe standing areas to be designated in stadiums. As with most grounds, it is the clubs, local fans and local authorities who know their stadium far better than anybody else. It is therefore sensible that the decision should rest with them, and that they are empowered to take such decisions.

I am sure we all agree that safety has to be paramount. We have to recognise that the current system, as we have heard numerous times this afternoon, is not working. People routinely stand in seated areas and that creates dangers in itself. I have seen evidence of that. In seating areas that are not designed for standing, seats are often damaged, potentially making them more unsafe.

I feel, Ms McDonagh—we have had another change of identity this afternoon—that the proposal for the installation of specialised rail seating where appropriate, or standing in current seated areas where it can be made safe to do so, is a sensible approach. Surveys from the Football Supporters’ Federation demonstrate that fans want that choice, with 94% in support.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Fans have told me that they want that choice, not least because they see specifically designed safe standing areas as also offering the potential to offer better sightlines than is currently the case when smaller fans like me stand up in seated areas.

Gerald Jones: Thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She outlines a point already raised today and I totally agree with her.

We have heard about the Government’s planned review of the issue. However, the Government’s actions do not suggest that they are addressing the issue with any urgency. We need to make progress, and I urge the Minister to hear the calls from football fans and supporters’ organisations across the country and to respond positively and in good time.

5.56 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), I have stood in the Roker end and felt very unsafe indeed. [Laughter.] As a founder member and chair of the all-party group for football supporters, I felt it was vital for me to be here today to represent the interests of football supporters.

I attended my first game at St James’s Park in Newcastle in the 1966-67 season, so not quite as long ago as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I have visited 70-plus football league and premier league grounds and dozens upon dozens of non-league grounds, many of which I have heard mentioned today. For me the issue is not an abstract concept. It is something that I and many fans experience week in, week out through the football season. Standing in football grounds in all-seater stadiums happens now. The problem currently exists. We are not advocating a return to the large open terraces of the past.

Hillsborough was a tragedy, but it is not the only tragedy to befall football fans in this country. Ibrox in Glasgow has had two significant disasters in the past century. Bolton Wanderers had a significant disaster at
Burnden Park. Bradford had a dreadful fire that took many lives. There have been other smaller incidents where walls have fallen down or crush barriers have gone.

When I was a young person going to football matches, I remember people being crushed on crush barriers on open terraces on a regular basis, and the accident and emergency wards of our local hospitals were testimony to that. However, 27 years have passed since the Taylor report. Grounds, fans and football have changed, but there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Having seen the improvement, I was a fan and MP who remained to be convinced about safe standing at football grounds, but now—regularly attending football games at St James’s Park where I am a season ticket holder, and travelling round the country going to away games—I am part of the experience where fans stand week in, week out in the away ends and in many parts of home grounds as well. Safe standing is much safer than standing in designated seating areas; there is no doubt about that whatever. In designated seating areas where fans are standing in numbers, the seats in front of them are undoubtedly a trip hazard. I myself have tripped over seats, and seen many others doing so as well.

It is unlikely that safe standing will reduce ticket prices. In the Bundesliga, Dortmund, for instance, has one and half people standing for every seated place, but at Celtic—the experiment in Scotland—it is one for one. There will not be any real return from the football clubs’ perspective, but there is demand. No one wants it to become compulsory; it will be in selected parts of football grounds. However, there is no doubt that standing in sitting areas is less safe than safe standing. We need to think about it, and do something about it as soon as we can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Owing to the previous Chair’s great chairing and the great behaviour of all Members, I am unprecedentedly extending the length of speaking time. Members may now speak for five minutes, and if anybody wants to take interventions there is a length of speaking time. Members may now speak for five minutes, and if anybody wants to take interventions there is a length of speaking time. Members may now speak for five minutes, and if anybody wants to take interventions there is a length of speaking time.

We are speaking particularly today about those fans who go to away games—the ones who make that extra commitment—because they are the ones who predominantly stand. I am a Millwall season ticket holder. I do not have to stand when we are at home games, but people in large sections of the ground do. When I go to an away game, I have to stand. If anyone wants to go to an away game who cannot, or does not want to, stand, they are discriminated against, because they have no choice. If they want to go to the game, they have to stand, so what about those fans?

We need to create these designated areas. I pay tribute to the Football Supporters Federation and Supporters Direct for their persistent campaigning to get recognition for the voice of fans. It is not about recreating areas where clubs can cram people into a standing area; this is about creating rail seating where someone will stand in the place of a seat. We can therefore designate areas where people who choose to stand can do so safely, and those who want to sit can do so without the interference of those who want to stand.

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether the current situation, where people stand in areas that are designed for seating, is safe. The answer to that is clearly no, so the next question to the Minister has to be: “What are we going to do about it?” The Government cannot continue to put the telescope to a blind eye and say, “I see no fans standing.” They are, and they are standing in areas that are dangerous and not designed for it. We should deal with that.

When fans have been asked whether they want to stand, they have said in large numbers that they do. More than 3,000 Middlesbrough fans were consulted, and 99% of them said they wanted to stand. More than 7,000 Arsenal supporters were consulted, and 96% of them said they wanted to stand. Spirit of Shankly consulted 20,000 of its fans, and the overwhelming majority wanted to stand. Consistently, throughout the football league, fans are telling us that they want to stand in safe areas.

The Minister could allow a relaxing of the regulations to allow rail seating to be introduced in grounds. For games where the regulations demand that fans have a seat, seats could be put down and it would become a seated stadium. For those games where an area is designated for standing, those seats could be locked back by the grounds staff and the area could be used for standing. When we have consulted with the local authority, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, the police, the fans and the local club, I do not see why we cannot designate safe areas where fans can stand. I do not see why we cannot relax the regulations to deal with a situation that is currently unsafe.

In answer to some questions last week, the Minister very helpfully said that she was looking to hold a fundamental review of safety in football stadiums, but over the weekend we heard rumours of No. 10 pushing back against that. Can she assure us that that did not happen over the weekend, and that we will get a full, fundamental review of safe standing in football stadiums?

Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) on initiating the debate. In the late 1990s,
I initiated a similar debate and introduced a private Member’s Bill, which the Government of the day, in their wisdom, talked out. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has better luck with his current campaign.

Every week, hundreds of thousands of people attend football matches in leagues 1 and 2, and non-league games. They attend rugby matches, rugby league matches and horse racing, and they can stand up at all those events. Indeed, if one wishes to include fishing as a sport, one could say that for fishing—the most popular participatory sport in the country—one can choose to stand or sit. However, at championship and premiership matches, one cannot choose to stand. Furthermore, literally hundreds of thousands of people attend pop concerts such as Glastonbury, many of which are held in football grounds where the fans cannot stand up to watch a game. Yet they can stand up to watch a concert. They can jump up and down, and that is perfectly legal.

The Minister is on record as saying:

“While I appreciate there is a vocal minority who want a return to standing, I don’t think they speak for the majority and I remain to be convinced of the case. The clubs aren’t convinced either. I know there have been surveys done and there is no desire among the top clubs to change this policy.”

That is just not true. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and other speakers pointed out, club after club have asked for the right to have a safe standing area.

Reference was made earlier to the fact that West Bromwich applied to the Minister when they were still in the premiership to be allowed to have a safe area for 3,800 people. She turned it down. The great club of Aston Villa, on the edge of my constituency, wrote to me saying, “Here at Aston Villa, we believe that existing legislation should be changed to afford all EFL clubs the opportunity to offer their supporters the choice to sit or stand at matches in safe, licensed stadiums.” One after another, clubs in the championship and premiership have said that they would like to have that option.

Ever since I initiated, many years ago, the debate that I referred to, I have never had a satisfactory answer from any Minister to this question. How can it be safe for hundreds of thousands of pop fans to jump up and down at pop concerts, but not safe for a few thousand football fans to stand up behind rail seats? It happens in the Bundesliga and other European leagues, and it is perfectly safe. Nobody has ever given me a convincing argument about why it is safe for hundreds of thousands of people to jump up and down and not safe for a few thousand people to stand up.

The Scottish Parliament rightly recognises that ridiculous contradiction and has allowed clubs in the Scottish Premiership to trial safe standing. Celtic, which 50,000 supporters watch every week, has introduced safe standing in a small segment of the ground, and it has proved very popular. It is about time that we in England caught up with Scotland. It is about time that football fans in England were allowed to stand up.

When I was a child, it was evident to everybody who came to my house that I had an incredibly obsessive football-supporting father. They spotted it from the moment they stepped into the lounge and saw the football shrine made up of memorabilia collected over years, which outgrew the area it was originally assigned to. The evidence of my father’s support for his team even pushed away the family photographs. If people failed to miss that, they would notice the football programmes in frames throughout the house and up the stairs, which my dad would happily point out to anyone who showed a bit of interest in them. I witnessed the weekly rituals he went through. Every time his team played a match, we had to make mum sit upstairs in the bedroom, because if she set foot in the lounge, the opposition would score against the team we were all cheering along. I learned from a very young age how important football is. I believe that the vast majority of football fans are entirely decent, law-abiding people—although some, like my dad, are utterly obsessed.

I am very proud to have Hull City in my constituency. In 2012, it announced that it supports safe standing in principle. In June, representatives of the club came to Parliament to lobby MPs about this issue, although I was sadly unable to attend that event. Geoff Bielby, the chairman of the Hull City Supporters’ Trust, and Barbara Wilkinson, the secretary of Senior Tigers—a supporters’ group for over-55s—expressed a preference for safe standing. They suggesting designating a small area of the KCOM stadium for safe standing—they suggested it could accommodate 7,500 people.

A survey has shown that 47% of fans would be more likely to attend a football match if there was safe standing. I cannot speak for everyone else’s team, but Hull City certainly want to encourage as many people as possible to come down and cheer it on. If this is one way to do it, I say, “Let’s go for it.” If more fans come to matches, that will hopefully bring in a lot of extra income.

As many hon. Members have said, people stand anyway. A Hull City supporter who is unable to stand as he finds it difficult told me that he wants safe standing. I asked him why, and he said that he wants to be in a seated area where the stewards can enforce sitting and can make sure people in that area sit down. He said that, at the moment, people stand all over the place, but giving people the choice and saying, “If you want to stand, go here. If you want to sit, respect the fact that everybody in this area wants to sit,” would be a practical solution to the problem.

It is time that we allow local clubs to make these decisions, based on local information. I am not saying that we should create a rule that affects every club in every city, but for clubs such as Hull City, surely it should be up to the local authority, the police and the football club to work together and think about what really works for our football fans and our city. I do not believe that one size fits all. Allowing a local decision-making body to decide on the amount of safe standing means that it can adapt quickly to changing circumstances. We would not need to have a big debate if, a bit further down the line, we want to reduce or increase the amount of safe standing. That would be the best solution and the best decision for obsessive fans such as my dad and clubs such as Hull City.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I call Hilary Benn.
6.14 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I have got it this time. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh.

I confess that, when I was first approached by constituents who said, “We would like safe standing,” my gut reaction was to say, “I really don’t think so.” I remember replying to, I think, the first person who ever wrote to me on the subject, that, “Nothing we do should in any way jeopardise safety, because we all remember the horror of Hillsborough.” I am here today because I changed my mind.

I pay tribute to the Leeds United Supporters’ Trust for its work—Jon Darch is its lead campaigner on safe standing. It polled its members—to add to what my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) just said, 97% were in favour—and recently organised a safe standing roadshow at Elland Road. Angus Kinnear, the managing director of Leeds United, wrote to me, as the local Member of Parliament—it is a great honour to represent Leeds United and Elland Road—and said, “The club wants to see a change in the law.”

My initial reaction was as it was for the reasons that my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) set out. It should be obvious to the Minister, who is passionate about football, that two truths have been expressed in this debate: the current situation is not working and it is not safe. It is not working, because fans are standing. We have heard evidence about that. Everyone can see it with their own eyes when they go to matches or watch them on the telly, and hon. Members have talked about that today. It is not safe for reasons that my hon. Friends the Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Burnley (Julie Cooper) set out very clearly. I am quite tall, and it is a terrible risk for me to stand with a seat in front of me, because if I am knocked, I will tumble forward. I do not see how we can accept the reality that some fans want to stand, but allow the safety risk to be incurred.

I had never heard of rail seating—I did not know what it was—but as part of my education I saw the pictures and read the evidence, which has been referred to today, from places where rail seating has been used. It is not a return to the standing of the past; it is a completely different method. It is safe and gives fans the choice.

I simply say this to the Minister: this is an idea whose time has come. I hope very much that, after listening to, I think, the first person who ever wrote to me on the subject, that, “Nothing we do should in any way jeopardise safety, because we all remember the horror of Hillsborough.” I am here today because I changed my mind.

This point will appeal particularly to the Minister—I am revealing my true passion, as well as my representative pleasure and privilege. I look forward to the day when safe standing is also permitted at the new White Hart Lane.

6.19 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I genuinely appreciate your including me in today’s debate, Ms McDonagh. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for bringing this timely debate to the House.

This is another good example of where we as legislators are not slightly but significantly behind public opinion. It is clear from the evidence that many football fans are pressing for a change to the situation in our stadiums. Something like 69% of football fans—96% of Arsenal fans according to one colleague—would prefer to have a safe standing area. Right across the country there is a real movement for safe standing, which we need to respond to.

I have been to many grounds, although not as many as some hon. Members. In this debate, I have been to a great number of non-league clubs, such as Barnet, Brentford, Leamington football club obviously, and even Nuneaton Borough on three occasions. There is a terrific atmosphere on the terraces, as is to be expected at those sorts of grounds. I have been to the San Siro stadium, home of AC Milan, and to some of the other larger stadiums in Europe, but the most unsafe and threatened that I have ever felt was on steeply tiered seating areas such as at the Parc des Princes, watching Paris Saint-Germain. It can be so dangerous if there is a movement from behind in some of these seated areas. Some sort of tragedy could happen so easily. We need to be cognisant of changes in fan behaviour.

The all-seater stadium is a hangover from another era. Some of us remember those dark days in the 1980s. We are here, 27 years on. It is a significant length of time, and it is worth reflecting on how much the game has changed, particularly since 1990: the approach, the professionalism and the ownership of the game but also how fans engage with it.

Other hon. Members commented about the use of stadiums for all manner of different sports events and for rock concerts. I have been to the Ricoh arena recently to watch Coventry City and also to see the Rolling Stones. I felt no threat and no sense of risk in the crowd in the centre of the stadium. Let us look to the Bundesliga. 10 of 18 stadiums have safe standing areas. Borussia Dortmund and other clubs are so far ahead in club ownership, in terms of not just safe standing areas but the introduction of railled seats. There is so much we need to do to change our game in this country. As I said, 27 years is a very long time. It is long overdue that we change our approach to fans’ enjoyment of our beloved game. I very much support the petition.

6.22 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): There are many things I would like to say and many things I would like to challenge. Ten MPs made a point that I would like to challenge, but I am not able to do so because of the ongoing court proceedings. I point that out as a fact but also because there are people with far greater expertise, such as one of my constituents, who has a dramatic amount of expertise in this area and could contribute greatly, who cannot speak because that would compromise court proceedings. The timescale is important, because
some issues need to be discussed. I refer specifically to the comments made by 10 MPs today that it would be highly inappropriate for me to respond to.

As it happens, I am a football fan who for 25 years has sat only twice. Because one of those occasions led to a very unlucky defeat, I refuse to do so other than when one could only get a ticket at Wembley. There is not a corner, wall or even roof of Elland Road where I have not stood. The concept of standing is very pleasant and the concept of seating is not.

Spiritually, I am totally in support of what the Football Supporters Federation wants to achieve and the practical way it is going about it, but there are some issues that the Minister ought to consider. First is the safety or otherwise of current football stadiums, which has been raised in a different context. Many MPs have suggested that they are much safer than they were, but I challenge that notion. The ability to get out of a football stadium in a disaster has not been tested in real time in any stadium in this country. Seating is probably worse than railed standing would be. The Leeds University model that is used to test the design of stadiums is flawed. I would like to illustrate my point by giving precise examples that are unsafe, but it would be problematic to do so. When I have challenged football safety officers and owners on this, I have been given confirmation that there is no system. Therefore, there needs to be a review of all aspects of safety, including the remaining banks of seating and the inability to get out of stadiums quickly in an emergency.

Secondly, 11 MPs mentioned Germany. I have been to most of the Bundesliga grounds with the chief safety officer, the chief family liaison officer and with the ultra leader. I went to quite a number of major Italian grounds last season with the safety officers. Safe standing is quite possible, but other issues emerge. The Minister should talk to the safety officers in Italy; there, the big safety issue is the firing of pyrotechnics as missiles from one end of the stadium to the other. That is a major issue in Italy. The supporter who fell to his death in a disaster must remain sensitive to the Hillsborough disaster and the families of those affected by that awful day.

Let us be clear: in the Bundesliga, there is a whole series of safety problems—some in the seating but some in the safe standing areas, too, which the safety officers have to deal with all the time. Fans have to have a season ticket. The amount of alcohol provided is significantly less in standing areas than in seating areas.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Do any other Back-Bench Members wish to speak?

Clive Efford: I’ll have another go.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): No, Mr Efford. I think you will find you have spoken already. I call Sandy Martin.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Thank you, Ms McDonagh. I will not speak for long because I was not here at the start and I cannot be here at the end. I just want pay tribute to the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) for introducing the petition, and for being an Ipswich Town fan.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, for the first time. I think. I am pleased to take part in today’s debate. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) on setting out the case and the current situation so well. I add my thanks and congratulations to Owen Riches who launched the petition and all who worked so hard to get this issue brought to the House.

Throughout the debate a number of Members have been dreaming—I use that word advisedly—of the day that their local club will reach the heights of the premier league. Some Members took the opportunity to indulge in a bit of local football banter. The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) before describing Portsmouth as playing closer to the Sunday league than the premier league. As always, politicians are lying.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) made the vital point, since made by others, that standing is happening anyway and we should get on with making it safer. I agree with him and others that in doing so we must remain sensitive to the Hillsborough disaster and the families of those affected by that awful day.

Like the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), I declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters. Despite that, the sport I played week in, week out for 17 years was rugby. My first love was football, and for my sins I am a loyal St Johnstone fan. The Saints are going through what is probably the club’s most consistent and best footballing spell in their history, having qualified for Europe numerous times in recent years and—touch wood—been a regular fixture in Scotland’s top flight for the last 10 years.

When that top flight was formed in 1998, it followed the Taylor review in England stipulating that all grounds must be all-seater, with a minimum of 10,000 seats—although that has been reduced to 6,000. That measure cost many Scottish clubs dearly: many are still in debt as a result and some have gone into liquidation. Coincidently, St Johnstone were the first club in the UK to open a purpose-built all-seater stadium, just weeks after the Hillsborough disaster. Indeed, Lord Justice Taylor visited the stadium during his inquiry into that disaster.

The debate has been brought about by the growing appetite across these islands for safe standing sections to be introduced at grounds throughout the country. More than 110,000 people signed the petition, highlighting that growing demand. The Football Supporters Federation, referenced heavily throughout the debate, has done an excellent job in championing safe standing areas in grounds. That grassroots campaign has even managed to unite Manchester United and Manchester United
City supporters—no mean feat, though not quite Rangers and Celtic, or St Mirren and Morton in my area.

Standing at football has always been part of the game. Even after the Football Spectators Act 1989, supporters have chosen still to stand. Indeed, my first recollection of football was, I think, 1986, for the Stanley Rous cup, standing on the terraced slopes of Hampden against the auld enemy, England. My selective amnesia forbids my telling the House the result of the game. [Interuption.] The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) is correct.

Ninety-four per cent. of respondents to the survey that has been mentioned believed that fans should be able to choose whether to stand or sit at football matches. That does not surprise me in the slightest. However, not one single football supporter would place the safety of other fans at risk. This debate is so important because it is fan-led. Fans can provide a range of examples of where safe standing has been produced in other countries across Europe, including Scotland. I would be grateful for the Minister’s expanding on any recent conversations she has had with the footballing authorities in Scotland, Germany or anywhere else in Europe on that point. In addition, what assessment have the UK Government, FA or premier league carried out on any individual stadiums across Europe that allow safe standing as a means by which to judge whether the policy in England and Wales can be relaxed in some way?

I mentioned that the Scottish Professional Football League’s seating requirements were relaxed. At the time that announcement was made, the chief executive of the then Scottish premier league, Neil Doncaster, said the decision was driven by “supporter demand” and that “Whenever we talk to supporters about what they’d like to see, safe standing comes up as one of the things they’d like to see”.

Scottish football is doing a lot of work to improve the fan experience for those attending a game at the weekend. I should note that that is not being done at the expense of fan safety. In making that decision, the SPFL not only listened to its member clubs and to supporter groups, but gathered information that allowed it to make an evidence-based decision. It assessed the systems in place in Germany, specifically looking at Borussia Dortmund’s ground, where Mr Doncaster found that they have a fantastic set-up that improves the fan experience and creates a great atmosphere.

In response to fans’ demands, Celtic made history in 2016 by being the first club in the UK to install a safe standing system in their stadium, as was referenced, with 3,000 rail seats put in place at Parkhead. That installation was warmly welcomed by Celtic fans and endorsed by Jon Darch of the Football Supporters Federation. Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers also said that the installation of safe standing at Celtic Park has helped to create an even better atmosphere in the ground.

With its design based on barrier technology and its robust seat and high back, the rail seat forms a strong and continuous handrail to facilitate safe standing. The seats are compact and have been approved for use by both UEFA and FIFA for champions league and World Cup matches. Indeed, St Mirren, Paisley’s newly promoted top-flight club, have visited Celtic Park and are looking very seriously at introducing a safe standing section at St Mirren Park.

It is vital that we ensure the safety of all supporters who trek through the turnstiles each and every week. The memory and legacy of Hillsborough demand that. However, now is surely the time to review safe standing in football stadiums. I hope the Minister hears the demands of supporters and announces a review that assesses the examples in Scotland and across Europe of safe standing at football stadiums.

6.36 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their fantastic contributions to this important debate.

I start by paying respect to the 96 fans who went to a football match but never came home after the tragic events at Hillsborough. I pay tribute to those hon. Members who have not only spoken today, but campaigned for justice for many years, even decades. Their continued courage and determination will bring about justice for the 96. I extend my thanks to Mr Speaker and to the Petitions Committee for issuing guidance around the ongoing court case, and I am grateful to the Chair for keeping a close eye on proceedings today.

I also thank Owen, who is here today. For those who do not know, Owen is 17 and he started the safe standing petition online just a few months ago. He is already making footballing history. I am sure my colleagues will join me in thanking him for his contribution to today’s discussion. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

As many colleagues from all parts of the House have said, when discussing safe standing it is vital to understand and acknowledge that it is not a step back for football or a return to the terraces of the ’80s; it is the opposite. It is about moving football spectating forward and into a new era—into the future—so that it becomes safer, more inclusive and gives fans this choice.

The data and extent of the surveys provided by the English Football League and fan groups clearly show that fans want a safe standing option. More than 50 representatives from supporter groups joined me at my parliamentary roundtable, where I heard about a fantastic example of safe standing being used in Orlando. It is an inclusive area that puts wheelchair users at the heart of the action—not seeing them as an afterthought. They are in among the crowd and can experience football along with every other fan. It is a fantastic example of how safe standing can make football more inclusive for all.

However, at the heart of the debate is safety. It always has been and always will be, and it is not something that I will ever compromise on. The safety of fans at football matches is the first and foremost factor that we looked at when discussing safe standing. As many colleagues have already pointed out with interesting examples, the current system is not working. It is not safe. Week in, week out, fans like myself stand in seated areas, which is not safe. Owen himself started the petition because he was injured at a football match by people behind falling on top of him. Stewards are powerless. Clubs do not want to get involved and the police will intervene only if an argument escalates. Anyone who has travelled away with their club will have had the experience of steep upper tiers, where the seat in front barely comes above their socks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said, it is simply not safe.
I cannot and will not stand by while fans are being injured, especially when we have alternative ways to improve things and minimise risk. That is why I am proud to support the installation of specialised rail seating, where appropriate, or standing in current seated areas where it can be made safe. That could be by the addition of bars or by other means. It is a matter of converting a small section of a stadium to be designated for safe standing—capped at 7,500 safe standing spaces. That is in line with what the EFL has proposed. We want to give fans, clubs and the safety authorities the power to allow a small area inside a stadium to be designated for safe standing. Clubs, fans and safety authorities know their stadiums better than anyone in Whitehall. The decision should rest with them. A different set of rules applies to football fans, and it is not right. At the time of my parliamentary roundtable, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority told me that the last time it met a Minister was more than three months ago. Every supporters group that I speak to tells me that every Minister has refused to meet them in the past few months. It is time that the Government stopped taking fans for granted, and started listening to them.

People who go to a football game at the Emirates or Etihad stadiums on a Saturday will be asked to sit down. At the same stadiums a few days later people can, without the threat of being evicted, stand at a pop concert and jump up and down. They can go to the rugby, stand and enjoy supporting their team without the threat of being evicted. Three weeks ago I was pleased when the Sports Minister announced a review of safe standing; but we have heard nothing since—but no details and no timetable. Nothing. I am told there is a rumour—I hope it is wrong—that the Minister will announce the postponement of the review. We must all remind ourselves that while the debate is about how we enjoy football it is also about how we make the current system—which is not safe—safer for all, including the elderly who want to enjoy the national game, families who want to attend with children, and everyone who wants to enjoy football.

Today’s debate is about safe standing in 2018, not the terraces of the 1980s. It has been about how fans can stand safely at a football match and prevent serious injury. There are 112,000 people who have filled in a survey online, and almost 6,000 people responded to the English Football League. More than 30,000 fans gave their views to the English Football League. More than 4 million Twitter uses have seen a tweet relating to safe standing in the past month. The premier league has spoken about safe standing. So have the EFL and the Football Association; and finally so have we today in the Chamber. If the Minister is thinking about postponing the review, I strongly urge him to reconsider.

Football can, as has already been shown, have a sensible debate about safe standing that focuses on safe standing in the future. The Minister, for whom I have great respect, has an open goal. She can listen to the vocal majority or choose to ignore us.

6.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): It is as always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh.

I have been a football fan for as long as I can remember. I played football, I collected the sticker books—I still do—and as soon as I was old enough, I started to go to football matches. I used to walk across the rec to Reachtsfield to watch Wyth Town. If I had earned extra pocket money, I used to jump on the bus to watch Folkestone play. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) will be pleased to hear that when I was at university I watched Hull a few times a season. Finally, when I started to earn money, I began to watch Spurs, the team I began idolising at the age of eight.

Why do I say that? It is not because of the nostalgia that many have said we should employ in our discussions. I say it to explain that football runs through my veins. It is only because I care so much about the game that I felt so disappointed with my own loose language on safe standing, which rightly led to outrage, but which sadly turned into abuse and threats of violence, both physical and sexual. I did not expect that from those with whom I have stood shoulder to shoulder throughout the years.

Let me say from the outset that I did not mean to suggest that only a vocal minority support safe standing—surveys show otherwise, but they also show that only a small percentage would want to stand throughout the match. I confused the two and we are here today as a result, but the debate gives us the opportunity to talk about the future of all-seater stadiums. In my speech, I will try to reflect some of the comments made by 33 colleagues during the debate, set out Government thinking and explain some of the challenges we face.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I want to reflect on what the Minister has just said. I implore everybody to ensure that all sides can be heard in the debate. That is what is important. We need conduct that enables the broadest possible debate.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I still feel quite scared by the response I received on social media to my initial comments. They were loose and wrong, but were not a reflection of my views on football. It was certainly unfair of people to say that I did not understand the game with which I have been personally involved since I was knee high to a grasshopper. That shows a lack of understanding that Ministers and Members of Parliament have views and sometimes make mistakes.

It is useful to start by summarising very briefly the framework in which we operate. As colleagues have heard, Lord Justice Taylor’s report following the terrible Hillsborough disaster ushered in the all-seater policy for the top two divisions of English football, as well as Wembley stadium and the Principality stadium in Cardiff. The wider safety regime, which includes the all-seater policy, also took into account other tragic events, such as that at Bradford. No Government of any political persuasion should ever be complacent about safety or other measures that have enabled us to achieve such consistently high levels of safety since the all-seater regulations were introduced. That must be paramount in our considerations.

Ian Mearns: One thing that has changed since Hillsborough is that the Government and the establishment have taken safety at football grounds much more seriously.
Ibrox had two disasters in the space of less than 50 years, and Bolton Wanderers had a significant one. Crushing injuries occurred week in, week out at football grounds. The evidence of earlier years shows that football’s fans and their safety were not taken seriously by people in the halls of power.

Tracey Crouch: I was about to say that the all-seater policy has served football and football fans well over many years—the hon. Gentleman makes that point. It is not just a domestic measure: FIFA and UEFA both mandate that host stadiums for their main competitions must be all-seater. Let us not forget that all-seater stadiums provided the impetus for clubs to transform their grounds after years of neglect, which meant the widespread improvement of facilities for fans, which has brought about a welcome increase in the diversity of those choosing to attend.

I recognise the increasing support for the Government to change the all-seater policy in the top two tiers of English football, and the interesting innovations in spectator accommodation in recent years. They include various forms of seats incorporating barriers, or seats with independent barriers, which provide both a safety rail and a seat. They have been installed at grounds in Germany and at Celtic Park. More recently, they have been installed at Shrewsbury Town in League One. Those developments led the then premier league club West Bromwich Albion to make the request to the Sports Ground Safety Authority to run a rail seating pilot. The request to install rail seating made it clear that the intention was to create a permanent area within the ground where supporters would be freely permitted to stand. That would have been in breach of the licence conditions imposed on all clubs in the top two divisions under the powers set out in the Football Spectators Act 1989, the current legislative framework.

Ministers make decisions based on the evidence put in front of them within the legal framework permitted. Contrary to media reports, I did not receive a recommendation from the SGSA to approve the application. The club’s request would have required an immediate change in the law as it stands. As the application was for permission to start this coming season, colleagues will appreciate that the processes required would have taken more than the few months that Albion wanted them completed in. However, more significantly, the current legislative framework means that I cannot allow for any pilots. There is no wriggle room. It is either the status quo or changing the legislation.

So, what next? What are we going to do? The one thing we need to do is to collect and analyse the evidence that exists and ensure that all views on this issue can be heard and considered before we make any decision on changes to the all-seater policy—a point that many hon. Members have made today. We need proper evidence and solutions about how risks associated with standing would be addressed and what systems might be needed to achieve this. The first step is to gather that data and to conduct further research if necessary.

Today I can announce that we will commission an external analysis of evidence relating to the all-seater policy. My Department will be going out to tender for this piece of work shortly, and my aim is that the initial analysis work will be completed by the end of the year. As well as looking at what evidence already exists and assessing its reliability, that work will look to identify any important gaps in data, including injury data, and recommend the best ways of filling them.

The evidence of earlier years shows that football’s fans and their safety were not taken seriously by people in the halls of power.

The precise scope of that work will be defined in conjunction with the SGSA and other expert stakeholders. I am grateful to the Premier League and English Football League, with whom we have discussed this approach, and with whom we will work to improve the evidence base from the start of next season.

Clive Efford: I associate myself with the comments made earlier. The Minister is a passionate supporter of Tottenham and dedicated to football, and I know that she is passionate about it. I am sure that we all oppose those who have attacked her on social media. Does she agree that football clubs need to report where injuries are taking place within their grounds? If they are in locations where people are predominantly standing where they should be seated, that may give us a better idea of how those injuries are coming about. I suspect they are not being recorded properly.

Tracey Crouch: That perfectly outlines the challenge we face. At the moment, we do not have the data or the evidence to make a decision either way on the issue. What I am announcing today is that we will start the data and evidence collection, because as the hon. Gentleman says, it is clear that there are gaps in the injury data. We know that the current format of data collection does not allow people to specify some of the issues around the injuries that are happening at football matches.

I look forward to working closely with the Premier League, the English Football League and other organisations, including the Football Supporters Federation, which I met last week, to make progress together. I would like to thank the FSF, the Premier League, Mike Davis from Shrewsbury Town Supporters and the Plymouth Argyle management, who, in the middle of all the abuse, were kind and considerate in their conversations with me about the issue, which I appreciate. I also thank those at Spurs, and the chairman of Norwich City, for explaining the pragmatic approach that they are taking to ensure fans’ safety while still adhering to the law.

I acknowledge the evolution of stadium design, seating technology and modern crowd management approaches that has taken place in recent years. The data-gathering
work will look at the impact of those changes and consider any existing data on the wider impact of introducing the type of rail seating accommodation used in Germany and elsewhere on attendances, ticket prices, the atmosphere, the diversity of supporters, fan behaviour, the management of various parts of the stadiums and, of course, safety.

**Mr Betts:** In the review, will the Minister look at the discrimination that occurs at present? If there is no standing area and people insist on standing in seated areas, it means that there is no alternative for smaller people, such as women and children, who are prevented from enjoying the game and viewing it properly, or for people who have a disability and simply cannot stand up for 45 minutes.

**Tracey Crouch:** That is why I praise Norwich City’s pragmatic approach in recognising that some fans who were persistently standing in a family section were causing a great deal of distress to people who pay a significant amount of money to watch their team with young children. It has effectively moved those fans to a different part of the stadium, which allows the family supporters to continue to watch the football match.

**Mr Betts:** Will the Minister give way?

**Tracey Crouch:** No, I will carry on.

On top of what I have already announced, the SGSA is currently revising the “Green Guide”, which sets out the standards of sports ground safety that apply in this country. It is influential around the world, as it is absorbed by sports bodies and Governments looking for authoritative advice on sports grounds safety. The revised guide is due for publication later this year, and will offer refreshed technical guidance that sets out the standards for seats incorporating barriers and seats with independent barriers within the prevailing legislation and competition rules.

Clubs and local authorities are responsible for managing their grounds, and I and the SGSA will expect them to continue to apply the all-seater policy while we gather the evidence and data. To be clear, no one expects any fan to stay rooted in their seat for 90 minutes through goals, near misses and last-minute match-winners—or, in the case of Spurs fans, usually match-losers. That was never the intention of the all-seater policy.

There are many different views about the future of the all-seater policy and they all need to be heard. Some people feel unable to contribute to the discussion while legal proceedings are under way, as outlined by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). We need to be mindful of that. While the proceedings continue, we shall gather the missing data and evidence by working with the authorities, leagues, supporter groups and others.

With something as serious as football ground safety, change cannot and should not happen overnight, but, contrary to the reports on social media, my mind is open about the future of the all-seater policy. However, due process must be followed to ensure the safety of fans now and in the future—fans who, like me, stay loyal and true through the good times as well as the bad, and who spend a lot of money providing the lifeblood of their clubs up and down the country.

A million people watch football every week. I conclude by thanking those who signed the petition and hon. Members for reflecting their views and those of their constituents. I hope that we can move forward with the required data gathering, continue the discussion with key stakeholders and develop the “Green Guide” so that we all know where we stand.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered e-petition 207040 relating to allowing Premier League and Championship football clubs to introduce safe standing.

6.58 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 26 June 2018

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Phenylketonuria: Treatment and Support

9.30 am

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Given the number of Members who will seek to catch my eye, I am imposing a four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to treatment, support and innovative new medicines for phenylketonuria patients.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Robertson. It is just over 12 months since I was elected Member of Parliament for Blaydon, and only a few days less than that since I first heard of phenylketonuria—commonly known as PKU, which is easier to pronounce. One of my constituents, Barbara McGovern, had called at my office and spoken to a member of my staff about whether I would attend an event in Westminster on 28 June. Barbara’s son Archie has PKU, and she described his condition and some of the restrictions that he has to cope with every day. Her explanation of what PKU means, and her determination to get the best for her son, impressed my staff, who made sure that I attended the reception to learn more about the condition. Barbara and her husband David, and Archie, have travelled from the north-east to listen to the debate, and I welcome them.

Since that first encounter, I have been lucky enough to be introduced to the officers of the National Society for Phenylketonuria, and have had the chance to work with them and its other members to raise the profile of PKU, get people to understand it and its effects, and press for access to treatment and support. I will give a few of the many names that I could mention. Kate Learoyd and Caroline Graham both have children with PKU, and they have dedicated much of their time to talking to Members about the condition and the need for action for people who live with PKU. Professor Anita MacDonald OBE, of Birmingham Children’s Hospital, also does much to raise awareness of the condition and goes above and beyond in advising families affected by PKU on diet.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I commend both my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and the many parents and families who work to raise the issue. She is right to highlight how challenging the condition can be for children, particularly in adolescence. A constituent told me that her daughter asked whether, for her 18th birthday, she could eat a pizza in a restaurant—seemingly a normal activity for a teenager, but a clear challenge for such children, who want to fit in with their peers.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I commend both my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and the many parents and families who work to raise the issue. She is right to highlight how challenging the condition can be for children, particularly in adolescence. A constituent told me that her daughter asked whether, for her 18th birthday, she could eat a pizza in a restaurant—seemingly a normal activity for a teenager, but a clear challenge for such children, who want to fit in with their peers.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and of course there are many others working hard in the NSPKU.

PKU is a rare inherited disorder, affecting about one in 10,000 babies. Most people are familiar with the pinprick test that newborn babies are given; that is how the condition is picked up. It is one of a series of tests given. People with PKU are unable to break down the amino acid phenylalanine, which is found in proteins. They must have a diet very restricted in protein to prevent problems. If the condition is not properly controlled, it can lead to severe neurological and brain damage, as well as to behavioural problems. Untreated PKU causes profound, irreversible intellectual disability, seizures and behavioural problems. As the damage is not reversible, early diagnosis and early consistent treatment are vital.

I say that the condition can be treated by diet; that sounds easy, but it is not. Imagine, as a child or young person, trying to cope without all the foods that most children and adults take for granted. When we think of food that is high in protein, we probably think of meat, but that is the straightforward bit. All meats are on the red list, and so is fish. Everyday bread is too high in protein, so people with PKU must have special bread without protein, much of which must be baked at home using a specially prescribed flour.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Having learned about the disease and issues connected with it, I think that the hon. Lady is right to argue for better treatment, but I am struck by the peculiar and intense pressures that PKU puts on parents and carers. Does she agree that we should explore ways to support them in coping with those pressures?

Liz Twist: I agree. There is incredible strain on parents—and of course on people with the disease, but we must not forget about the parents.

As well as having to have bread specially baked with prescribed flour, people with PKU can have no cheese, eggs or dairy products. Even some vegetables, such as cauliflower, are problematic, and so are potatoes, so there can be no chips or crisps. The daily intake of food needs to be monitored constantly. Imagine how that must be for a child at school who just wants to join in with classmates, or for young people who want to go out and socialise with friends—perhaps to go for a pizza, as my hon. Friend mentioned—and get on with their life. Everything must be measured and calculated to make sure that the appropriate level of protein for the child or adult with PKU is not exceeded.
Let us not forget that the condition is lifelong, and adults, too, must restrict their intake of protein. On top of all that I have described, both children and adults must take a protein supplement. I and other MPs may have had the chance to try it, courtesy of our friends at the NSPKU, and it is not a pleasant experience. That puts additional pressure on parents, who often struggle to get their children to take the supplements, which they really need, three times a day. Making sure a child has the right diet, including when parents are not around to control it, and trying to make food interesting, often by starting from scratch with basic low-protein foods, is a minefield.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and on her work for the all-party group. A constituent shared with me some experiences similar to the ones that she has outlined. They are heartbreaking, and other Members who have constituents with PKU will share that feeling. Does the hon. Lady agree that alongside the medicinal treatments that might be available, it is important to raise awareness, through debates such as this one, and through Thursday’s “diet for a day”, in order to help provide and incentivise more support for parents who are supporting their children with PKU?

Liz Twist: I agree; it is important to look at the question in the round. Many parents find that they need to give up work or reduce their hours to maintain their child’s diet and keep them healthy. At the end of last year, the NSPKU produced a booklet and video, “Patient Voices: Listening to the experience of people living with PKU”, which clearly and movingly sets out the practical and psychological impact of the condition on individuals.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting the time for a debate on the issue; not enough is known about it. It strikes me, as I listen to her, that a child with PKU is a prisoner of their body, in a way, and so are their parents, because of the regimented way they must deal with the child’s needs. Does she agree?

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree that it places an incredible strain on parents, who must live with that all the time. I recommend the “Patient Voices” booklet and video to anyone who has not already seen them.

In this debate, I will highlight very specific concerns about treatment and support for PKU. The first is the issue of access to a drug treatment, sapropterin, which is thankfully more commonly known as Kuvan. Although it is available in 25 countries across Europe, and was licensed for marketing over 10 years ago in the European Union, Kuvan is not available to people with PKU in the UK.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on this important debate. She makes a hugely important point about the licensing of Kuvan. The European Medicines Agency licensed the drug in 2008, and 10 years on we have buck-passing between the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England. It is deeply concerning. I am representing two children with PKU—I am sure there are many more—in my constituency. I got a letter back from NICE just a few weeks ago that said that the condition and the treatments for PKU are “the subject of a NHS England commissioning policy...not covered by any existing NICE guidance.” It went on to pass the buck back to NHS England. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is time for the buck-passing to stop, and for the treatment to be licensed?

Liz Twist: I absolutely agree. I hope that one of the good things that will come out of this debate is that the buck stops being passed, and the assessment gets done as quickly as possible. It is so important for people to have access to this drug; we need that to be sorted.

There is evidence that for a significant proportion of people with PKU—about 25%—this drug can significantly improve their condition. It does not cure it, but it does make it much easier to deal with the dietary issues, which have such an impact on the way people live their lives. Despite the drug having been around for so long, NHS England has only recently considered it for the management of PKU. The drug has now been referred to NICE for assessment and technology appraisal. The APPG on PKU recently heard from NICE about the process, but there is concern about the timescales and how the benefits of the treatment will be assessed. Understandably, there is huge frustration on the part of the PKU community that there are children and adults who could be benefiting from Kuvan now, and there is substantial evidence to support its benefits.

There is a particular issue about prescribing Kuvan for pregnant women with PKU, who can understandably find it hugely difficult to control their diet, and who fear the effect of any problems on their unborn child. While there is a 2013 commissioning policy in place that allows Kuvan to be prescribed to some pregnant women, it can be difficult for women to be prescribed it in a timely way.

Some people, some of whom are in this room, have had access to Kuvan through individual funding requests, or on a trial basis. Those people have found real benefits from the drug. My constituent Archie, who is here, started on the treatment earlier this year. Archie tells me that he has benefited from having Kuvan now, and there is evidence that for a significant proportion of people with PKU, who can understandably find it hugely difficult to control their diet, and who fear the effect of any problems on their unborn child. While there is a 2013 commissioning policy in place that allows Kuvan to be prescribed to some pregnant women, it can be difficult for women to be prescribed it in a timely way.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Kuvan, the brand name for sapropterin, is clearly deeply beneficial for about 20% to 30% of sufferers. I met the manufacturers last week, and they told me they had written to NHS England twice to ask for meetings to discuss price, but they are still waiting for a response. Will she join me in
urging the Minister to use all his best offices to ensure that that meeting and the price negotiation can go ahead?

Liz Twist: I certainly do join the hon. Lady in that wish. I too have met BioMarin, which says it is prepared to negotiate significantly on the price, but we need to get in there and ensure that it happens quickly.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on the knowledgeable and passionate way in which she is putting the case. Does she agree that this is an example of the way that we in this country are very bad at dealing with rare conditions and potential therapies or treatments for them? Does she believe that, while this is a knowledgeable and passionate way in which she is dealing with rare conditions and potential therapies or treatments for them? Does she believe that, while this needs to be hurried up, the whole process needs to be streamlined and sped up?

Liz Twist: I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend. It has become clear, as we have looked into the issue, that there is a very complex way of assessing drugs. Clearly, we want to get the process right, but there needs to be a rigorous look at that process, not just for Kuvan, but for other treatments for rare diseases. PKU perhaps falls between the cracks, because it is not quite rare enough to be in that group, but it is still very rare, and will be pushed to the back of the queue if it goes into a more general group.

For those whom Kuvan will not help, and who still need to manage their diet carefully, there is another issue that must be addressed: access to low-protein foods, which help to maintain the diet. Individuals may be advised through their dietican and their specialist centre that they need a particular level of foodstuff supplies, such as the low-protein flour I mentioned, which I am told can be used in many ways to try to make the diet more palatable. General practitioners, however, may not have a complete understanding of the condition or the dietary needs, and may feel that patients are just trying to get food on the cheap, and they may limit or deny prescriptions for those foodstuffs. They may feel that they are like gluten-free foods, which can be bought at supermarkets.

The fact is that those foods and supplements cannot be bought; they are available only on prescription, and the absence of them creates a real injury to those affected. It is not just that they are not there; it is actually damaging if they are not available. It would be good if the Minister could address how we can ensure that GPs prescribe the specialist foodstuffs that form part of the treatment that those with PKU need, and how we can close the gap between the specialist services, clinical commissioning groups and GPs.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady. Does she agree that there should be clear guidance, so that GPs or CCGs that are thinking about stopping prescribing that stuff can be told quickly and clearly that that is the wrong thing to do, and that there is no other way of getting this bread, and so that if one of them is foolish enough to go down that line, there can be a quick resolution?

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment, and I agree. Last week at the APPG meeting, we heard some terrible stories; over the years, people have felt as if they were asking for a favour in asking for those goods. They are not; the goods are absolutely essential, and they cannot be bought over the counter. We must do something about that. We need to square that circle.

Finally, for the 75% who will not benefit from Kuvan, it is important that new, innovative treatments are developed and assessed quickly, so that more people can benefit from treatments that enable them to live well and safely with the condition.

To conclude, it is important that we listen to individuals and families who are living with PKU day in and day out. It is time that this condition was acknowledged, and that we addressed the need for effective treatment. I hope that the Minister can give us positive news that will move us forward in helping those with PKU.

This Thursday, on National PKU Awareness Day, I and many other hon. Members in this room and across the House will undertake the PKU “diet for a day” challenge. We will restrict our protein intake to 10 grams a day, avoid all those things we normally eat without thinking, such as that piece of toast in the morning or Rice Krispies with real milk rather than coconut milk, and drink tea or coffee without milk. We know that we will not really face those restrictions day in, day out, or the relentless grind of getting the diet right to stay well, but we hope that it will help raise public awareness of PKU, and help to bring about change.

9.49 am

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Like other hon. Members, I wanted to speak in the debate because PKU affects a family in my constituency. I will not go over what PKU or Kuvan are. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) did an excellent job of that, and I congratulate her on her work as chair of the APPG in bringing this issue to wider attention across the House.

Scotland has a higher prevalence of PKU than other parts of the UK, which makes the attitude of the Scottish Medicines Consortium so disappointing. It has a poor record of approving treatments for very rare diseases, and I understand from conversations with the NSPKU that the current application for PKU is not going particularly well. The decision is due next week on 3 July, and there is real concern that it will not be approved, even for high-risk groups such as pregnant women. The hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned that there is currently a pretty poor Kuvan policy for pregnant women in England. It may be poor, but at least it is a policy; we do not even have that north of the border.

Pregnancies for women with PKU are extremely high risk. We have a slightly odd fail-first approach in this country, which can lead to serious defects and lifelong disabilities for children if they survive the pregnancy. The cost to the NHS of treating those disabilities over the life of the child is significantly more than the cost of Kuvan for the mother during pregnancy. We have an odd approach to cost-effectiveness when looking at medicines in this country that I think we need to reassess. That is not only true for Kuvan; we have seen it when talking about Orkambi and for various other issues.

I completely agree with the decision of the NSPKU to apply for Kuvan to be placed in the ultra-orphan stream due to the rareness of the condition and the Scottish gene variant. I was disappointed to hear of the
Scottish Government’s lack of engagement with the NSPKU, so I ask Scottish National party Members present to do something about that. While I appreciate that there is a distinction between the Scottish Government and the SMC, the Scottish Health Secretary could step up a little bit there.

As a Scot from Greater Glasgow, I was of course drinking Irn-Bru when I met the NSPKU in Porteullis House. That led to quite an interesting discussion, because Irn-Bru could previously be given to young adults with PKU as a kind of treat and something to make them feel normal, but then we introduced the sugar tax. The recipe for Irn-Bru changed overnight and they could no longer drink it. It suddenly became toxic. This is one situation in which a very well-meaning policy, such as the sugar tax, had unintended consequences.

Members may have been in touch with their diabetic constituents after the recipe for Lucozade changed and suddenly they could not drink something that had been safe for them. Unless someone has very good eyesight, it is hard to read on the can that the recipe has changed. We also have the odd situation in Scotland where, depending on the shop, someone can buy old recipe Irn-Bru or new recipe Irn-Bru. They have to check very carefully. I do not think that we do a good job of looking at the potential unintended consequences of changes in health policy for special interest groups.

I was struck in our discussions when it was put to me that, in 12 years’ time, my now four-year-old daughter will be going out and I will worry about her drinking alcohol or smoking, so imagine being the parent of a child with PKU and worrying about them going to a friend’s house and eating a bag of crisps. The difference in terms of the strain and pressure is huge. For the family in my constituency, the parents of 10-year-old Katie and 20-month-old Harry said to me:

“Having PKU is a constant shadow that hangs over the family. Everywhere you go you are surrounded by food they...can’t eat...Katie’s 10 and wishes she could eat what her friends can, or even a little bit of it, but is aware”—

even at age 10—

“of the implications of brain damage if she doesn’t stick to her diet... Kuvan might not work for her, but if it did it would be life changing...It’s really sad knowing that our one year old has all this ahead of him.”

We can and should do more to get Kuvan out there.

9.53 am

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I must admit that I had not heard of PKU before my election to the House; let alone some of the medical terms, which I still cannot pronounce. I think that the same is true for many across our country. In fact, after hearing that it meant a fault with enzymes, leading to an inability to break down the amino acid phenylalanine—PHE—I was not much the wiser.

However, after hearing my constituent Holly Mae’s story and what the condition meant for her everyday life and tasting the various concoctions that replace typical meals for PKU patients, I was left in no doubt as to the potential debilitating impact of the disease. That is why I will begin with the impact on everyday life and what that means in practice for people with PKU.

As has been mentioned, people with PKU have to eat a diet with virtually no protein, meaning that they must take chemical supplements to avoid malnourishment. The briefing I was sent by the excellent NSPKU describes the protein replacements as “unpalatable”. I have tasted those replacements and can assure hon. Members that the NSPKU is being polite; they are absolutely rank. However, they do not just taste disgusting. They form part of an incredibly prescriptive and restrictive diet that not only consumes a huge amount of time—approximately 19 hours a week—but makes living a normal life difficult and social activities intolerably difficult.

Hollie Mae’s mum, Tara, says they hardly ever eat out. When they do, they have to bring separate food. It is the same at friends’ houses. It is inevitably a difficult diet to manage, and because no young person likes to stand out as different, PKU makes sensitivity and insecurity around food and eating particularly pernicious among its teenage victims. These young people just want to live normal, happy lives, but PKU often exacerbates teenagers’ vulnerability to eating disorders and also becomes a mental health issue. I therefore urge the Minister to do all he can to improve access to psychological support for people with PKU. Clearly, the pressure of PKU and the diet it necessitates puts patients in immense difficulty and can be overwhelming.

We have just celebrated national carers week, and it is important to consider the burden that falls on families too, as we have heard. Half of parents stop working or reduce their hours to accommodate the extra work of caring for a child with PKU. What is more, the burden inevitably falls on women, with 81% of respondents to an NSPKU survey saying that it was the mothers who did most of the PKU-related work. I pay tribute to Tara and all the other parents and families who care for those with PKU. However, they do not want warm words, they need action.

I hope the Minister agrees that the opportunity to offer those with PKU and their families hope of a better life cannot be missed. There are practical things that can be done. I suggest that that means meeting with the manufacturers of a tablet can make a massive difference. It means making life a little bit easier for families and PKU patients by fixing the fragmented service on offer and smoothing and simplifying the chain from specialist metabolic clinic to GP to pharmacist to courier, complications in which constantly cause grief for patients. It definitely means ending the exclusion of PKU treatments from the prescription charge exemption.

The fact that PKU is a rare disease should not mean that it deserves any less of our attention. On behalf of my constituents and Hollie Mae, I urge the Minister to implement these changes.

9.57 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing the debate and on championing so well the cause of PKU patients and their families and carers.

It is also appropriate to highlight the pioneering work of my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). In an Adjournment debate on 1 December 2011, he highlighted his constituent’s problems
in obtaining a Kuvan prescription. He successfully secured a prescription for his constituent, but it is most unfortunate, as we have heard, that six and a half years later we are no further forward in making this drug, which has the proven potential to change many people’s lives, more widely available.

Finley Walsh lives in Lowestoft with his parents, Michelle and David. He is two and a half years old and he was born with PKU—a genetic condition that will be with him for his whole life. All Finley’s foods have to be weighed, using a calculation that takes account of the amount of protein in the food. His parents have to take weekly heel-prick blood tests, which are sent to Addenbrooke’s hospital in Cambridge for analysis. The results are then sent to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, where dieticians phone through the results that enable Michelle and David to prepare Finley’s food intake for the coming week. That is a critical, delicate and often worrying process for them. It is vital to get Finley’s protein levels right; if they go too high, there is a real risk of brain damage.

The challenges that the family face daily are immense and place a real strain on them. Quite often, the blood test results do not come through on time and must be chased up. At present, they have had no feedback for two weeks. Food must be ordered on prescription to enhance Finley’s diet. Products such as those from Violife and Hooba are not only expensive but, quite often, not immediately and readily available. At present, there is also the worry that Finley was due to have a test in May and that appointment has yet to take place.

Children with PKU suffer patchy care and support, which depends on where they live. That could be addressed by setting up specialised metabolic centres with an experienced metabolic physician and dietician. Psychological support should also be available in the centres to assist children if they experience learning difficulties and to ensure that they receive an education that enables them to realise their full potential. The centres could also administer prescriptions for PKU foods and dietary supplements so as to provide a more efficient service and to overcome the problems that the Walshes are experiencing.

On Thursday I, too, will take part in the PKU diet for a day challenge. In no way does that replicate the real experiences of people such as Finley, but I hope that together, we in this Chamber and around the House can highlight the need for modern treatments and better care for those who face such an enormous challenge daily.

10.1 am

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Like other hon. Members, I had never heard of this condition until I was contacted by a constituent, Kirsty Thornton from Dudley. She is the reason why I am taking part in the debate. To hear how the condition had affected her was very moving, and as a result of meeting her, I met Kate Learoyd and Caroline Graham, to whom I paid tribute earlier. I want to mention one other person at the outset. Professor Anita MacDonald OBE, who is with us today, is the brilliant head of a dedicated team of dieticians caring for children with rare inherited metabolic disorders at the Birmingham Children’s Hospital. I want to tell the Minister that Kate Learoyd, Caroline Graham and Anita MacDonald are here today. I hope that, at the conclusion of the debate, he might find a moment to say hello to them and arrange to meet them properly and at length subsequently.

It is deeply moving to hear how families manage this condition, particularly for toddlers, who cannot understand why they are not allowed to eat the same food as their siblings or have the same food as their friends at a birthday party. One parent has said of their child:

“...she resents the fact that her family can eat normally and she can’t. At mealtimes, she will go into a depression. Often she will ask to eat the crumbs of normal bread off our plates or we catch her licking our plates. It is awful to see.”

It is very distressing to hear how a simple mistake can have huge ramifications, affecting a young person’s concentration and even their mental health and then their ability to study or to work. One young person said:

“When I have high ph levels I slur my words, struggle with balance, lose my train of thought and stop speaking...I am hit with such fatigue that I lose sight of what it is like to feel awake.”

I would therefore like to encourage the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), to join us on the PKU diet challenge this Thursday—indeed, I hope that as many hon. Members as possible will take part—to highlight the difficulty of adhering to the strict rules that people with this condition have to follow. We have to do this properly and stick to the rules. We have to check all the ingredients, as we heard earlier, weigh foods properly and keep a tally throughout the day of the amount of protein that we have eaten. Most of all, as we have just heard, we have to remember that we are doing it only for a day and not a lifetime, like the constituents on whose behalf we are speaking today.

I want to ask the Minister three other questions before I conclude. First, as he has heard, we are calling for an examination of the failure to use Kuvan in the UK. That treatment can transform people’s lives. It has been licensed for almost 10 years and is used in lots of other countries in the EU. We would like the Minister to take personal charge of this matter and work out what can be done to sort out provision of it in the UK, too.

Secondly—we have raised this issue in respect of other conditions and other drugs—will he look at the appraisal rules for new treatments for PKU? This is a very rare disease, but it has a wide impact outside direct health costs. It is not a criticism of NICE or the Minister or Government, but the fact is that these are conditions and treatments that NICE was not really designed to deal with. How can the appraisal system be altered to work for conditions such as this?

Finally, will the Minister work with the NSPKU to review the provision of treatment to patients, including basic dietary treatments? How can that be made consistent across the country? That is a very urgent thing that it should be possible to sort out without too much difficulty.

10.5 am

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Robertson, for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing it. I speak as a chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, but also on behalf of my constituent Cait, and other constituents who suffer from PKU. I was very honoured to lead an Adjournment
debate on this condition in March. I will not repeat everything that I said then, but I want to add some points.

PKU is a very rare condition, affecting about one in 10,000 people, but it is not ultra-rare, and that is part of the problem. Living with PKU is extraordinarily challenging, but for the 20% to 30% of sufferers who react positively to the drug sapropterin, there is a glimmer of hope. That is only about 150 children in the UK, and about 350 people in total, but for them, sapropterin is life-changing. Sapropterin is available in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as in the United States. However, except for a small number of people—truly exceptional cases—and women during pregnancy, it is not available in England on the NHS, and that must change. It should be available for all those who would benefit, not just those who cannot stick to the diet. Those who do stick to the diet should not be excluded for good behaviour.

I understand that NICE sometimes has a very challenging time in considering whether to approve drugs that can be very expensive, but sapropterin does not fall into that category. In my Adjournment debate, I pointed out that when the broader economic benefits of prescribing PKU are compared with the costs of not doing so, the pure financial calculation alone suggests that it may even be financially beneficial to the public purse to prescribe the drug. Furthermore, as I stated back in March, BioMarin, the manufacturer, told me that it was willing to make a substantial reduction in the price. During that debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), suggested that a patient should go down the individual funding request route, but I understand that only one child has ever managed to receive the drug by that route. It simply does not work for the patients who need it.

I have written to the Under-Secretary of State for Health in the House of Lords a couple of times and I am grateful for his responses, but in his latest response, he suggests, in relation to the approval process, that the drug has now been prioritised for potential guidance development through NICE’s technology appraisal programme. Both patient stakeholders and the manufacturer are really concerned that that could lead to even more delays. BioMarin tells me that it has written twice to NHS England, offering to meet to discuss price. It wants to negotiate on price; it wants to deal with this condition; how he manages from day to day; and what would make a difference to the quality of his life and the lives of others living with PKU.

Mark first contacted me about the sugar tax, which I had blithely thought to be a good thing. The sugar-sweetened drinks issue sums up how people with PKU struggle to strike the excruciatingly difficult balance between a medically essential specialist diet and fitting in with society’s rigid norms about food and drink.

Our social lives revolve around food and drink, from children’s tea parties to teenagers’ fast-food binges to adults’ restaurant dates. I have been told time and again how difficult it is for people with PKU to cope with the stigma of being “difficult” and “different”, especially over something as integral to our lives as food. If they cannot enjoy cake, jelly, burgers and chips, at least they can enjoy a fizzy drink—Irn-Bru or whatever the brand—like everyone else. Now, however, it costs more, because aspartame is on the red list. People with PKU are being taxed on one of the few social drink and food experiences that they are able to share with everybody else, simply because of their condition.

Mark is keen to stress how much he appreciates Wales’ policy on universal free prescriptions, which allows him to receive the special food and medical dietary supplements that he needs through Tywyn health centre’s dispensary, when he needs them and for free. That means that people with PKU in Wales have a much better arrangement, he said, than those in England. None the less, Mark still faces public prejudice towards his invisible condition. He has had to explain to people that he is not “freeloading on food”, as though it were a matter of lifestyle choice, and not medical necessity.

A number of us in this Chamber have committed to the PKU “diet for a day” on Thursday. A great number of people in Wales have also done so, and they deserve a shout out. They are: Alex Jones of Cambrian News; Janet Davis, the supervisor of Brighter Foods, where Mark works; school friends Carys Hughes and Nicci Hughes; and Tywyn solicitor Andre Bright, who has committed to keeping to the diet for a week. He deserves respect, even if a week is nothing compared to what the families face. I am only brave and organised enough to do it for a day; I apologise. We are doing this in solidarity with PKU families, but we also know that this in no way fully reflects or replicates the reality of their lives. Most of us will do this by being fussy and awkward—I anticipate living off aubergine for a day—but we are only doing it for one day. We will not face this fraught, potentially toxic relationship with food, and the stigma associated with it, every day of our lives.

PKU affects every aspect of one’s life. Controlling the condition by diet alone causes immense strain, and any possible medical intervention will make an immense difference to the quality of people’s lives. Wales is alert to England’s NICE guidelines, and I urge the Minister...
to do all he can to press NICE to move ahead, so that his Department can recommend Kuvan. I also urge that other drugs, such as Pegvaliase, be considered. I ask the Government to consider the health implications of the wider use of aspartame, which is associated with the sugar tax, and the way that it affects a number of other health conditions as well. Diolch yn fawr.

10.13 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on bringing this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on her work in the past and on bringing her Adjournment debate to the House, which I supported.

I am the Democratic Unionist party health spokesperson, so it is important to be heard on this issue, which grossly affects people in Northern Ireland, as well as in the Republic of Ireland. Not many people know this, as Michael Caine always says, but there is a higher per capita prevalence of PKU in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. In fact, one in 4,000 people in Northern Ireland has this condition, compared to one in 12,000 in England.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the higher incidence in Northern Ireland, but also instances across the United Kingdom, does my hon. Friend agree that it is imperative for the Minister, and all health Departments across the UK under the devolution settlement, to ensure that the best possible treatment and support is given to PKU sufferers and their families?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We always look to the Minister for support on these issues, and he is always very forthcoming, so we look to him again with that in mind. It is clear that this condition affects my constituents and those of everyone else who is speaking today.

PKU is usually diagnosed shortly after birth by the heel test. Many women can tell us that when the heel prick is done and they hear their child crying in the hands of the midwife, their automatic reaction is to reach out and grab the child. That test is so important at a very early stage. For those families who receive a diagnosis of PKU, however, the pain begins when they realise just what that means.

People with PKU have a faulty version of the enzyme that breaks down the amino acid phenylalanine, a component of protein. Untreated, it can cause brain damage when it builds up in the blood and brain. Untreated PKU causes profound and irreversible intellectual disability, seizures and behavioural problems. The damage is not reversible, so early diagnosis and early consistent treatment is vital. That is why, in 1969, we added this test to the routine blood test at birth. Some people here were not born then; I was just a young child.

The only treatment for PKU that is currently funded by the NHS is a very restrictive diet. I am a type 2 diabetic, so I understand a wee bit what it means to be careful with what I eat. I know that if I had a wee bit of honey with my toast this morning, I probably should not have done, but by and large I know what I have to do, and what I can and cannot eat. For those with PKU it is much more difficult, and the restriction is great. Most sources of protein are removed from the diet to prevent brain damage.

I want to give a few quotes from the parents of PKU sufferers, so that we can understand a bit better the life lived by those with this disorder. One parent said:

“The low protein prescription breads and pastas give her stomach ache—another reason she refuses to eat them.”

A parent whose daughter has PKU said:

“My daughter struggles with drink supplements as they all upset her tummy so she has to take 50 tablets per day.”

Another parent said:

“PKU causes arguments between us. My husband and I have suffered with stress, we argue about the management of her diet. I had hoped after 12 years things would get easier but this diet is met with anger, frustration, resistance and annoyance all aimed at me.”

The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) already referred to the following case, but it is worth repeating simply because of its importance. One parent said that her daughter cannot normally eat, adding, “she will ask to eat crumbs of normal bread off our plates or we catch her licking our plates.”

That is the impact PKU has on some children and their families. That is why parents throughout the UK are demanding that more be done. We look to the Minister to see if more can be done through his office. If there is something to help these people, we must make it available. We all know what must be made available: Kuvan. We all know what it can do. One young girl took a one-month trial of Kuvan and could eat a normal vegetarian diet. She had more energy, her mood lifted, her nightmares stopped and she could do ordinary activities at home and at school. What a difference it made to the child’s quality of life, and that of the entire family!

I have read that the cost of Kuvan is on average £14,553 for a child and £43,597 for an adult, based on list pricing. The pharmaceutical company BioMarin has publicly stated its willingness to offer substantial discounts in a deal with the NHS. I am asking the Minister, as other Members have done, to broker that deal, and enter into meaningful discussions on providing the medication, as the High Court ruling has said that we should. I urge the Minister to instruct his Department to find a way of making this available, rather than simply checking a box.

In conclusion, I ask that no parent be forced into this situation when there is something available to prevent it. I stand with the PKU sufferers of Strangford, Northern Ireland and the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

10.19 am

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I commend the fantastic work of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and the National Society for Phenylketonuria, who have worked incredibly hard to raise awareness of PKU in Parliament in the past few months.

Until I met with representatives from the NSPKU a few months ago, I knew very little about PKU, like many other hon. Members. Since, I have learned a huge amount about it, and it has become clear that this devastating disease requires action. It affects one in 10,000 people across the UK. Although it is rare,
Faisal Rashid

an estimated 3,000 individuals in England alone live with it and could benefit from increased awareness and improved treatment of it.

As we have heard, the only treatment of PKU available on the NHS is a severely restrictive diet. Patient voices from the NSPKU illustrate how much of a daily struggle that diet is. It often leads to eating disorders and unhealthy relationships with food. It forces patients into social exclusion and is a great burden on their carers, who often also report psychological distress and strained family relationships. Studies show that half of parents will stop work or reduce their hours to accommodate the extra work needed to take care of a child with PKU.

I am grateful to my constituents, who shared with me the story of life with their five-year-old daughter who has PKU. Their openness helped me to understand what that life is like, and the difficulties their daughter faces daily, especially when she is unable to eat the same meals as other children at school.

The fragmented nature of NHS services provided to PKU patients often leads to confusion and mistakes in the chain. The inconsistent quality of those services has made the system needlessly complex and has added to the patients’ burden. There have been multiple reports of clinical commissioning groups restricting funding for PKU dietary products. The variable quality of even the most basic treatment is simply not good enough.

Beyond dietary treatments, a drug called Kuvan has been developed, as has been mentioned. It can treat up to 25% of PKU patients and allow them to eat substantially more natural proteins, which fundamentally improves their quality of life. Despite having been licensed in the USA since 2007 and the EU since 2008, and being used in almost every EU country as a routine treatment for PKU dietary products, the variable quality of even the most basic treatment is simply not good enough.

For Olivia, the waiting is taking its toll. She has frequent and severe migraines that cause vision disturbance, light, sound and taste sensitivity, vomiting and gastroparesis. During such times, she loses her PKU supplement and exchanges food, which takes her off diet for the duration of the migraine. They are difficult times for the whole family. Her illness and temporarily altered sense of taste mean she cannot drink the supplement and wants the normal food she prefers. How could anyone refuse a sick child because the food contains too much protein? She can be off diet for 60 hours.

Last year, Olivia was also diagnosed with moderate to severe scoliosis—a curved spine—for which she has to wear a back brace for 23 hours a day until she is 16 years old. It is uncomfortable, painful, and often prevents sleep. Her consultant said that spinal fusion surgery would likely be advised, but PKU is likely to result in low bone density, especially among girls. Olivia had a scan that showed that her bone density was abnormally low and getting worse.

Nothing more can be done dietetically; the amino acid supplement contains the correct levels of calcium, vitamin D, vitamin K and potassium, but it does not contain whole protein, which plays a major role in bone density. By definition, the diet goes to great lengths to avoid whole proteins, and that is one of the consequences. Olivia may therefore never be able to have the spinal fusion surgery that she needs, because her bones are not strong enough to take the screws and rods that would need to be drilled and fixed to her spine. Kuvan would at least allow her to eat more whole natural protein. Would that not be better for her, and everyone else who has been mentioned? The only access route to Kuvan remains an individual funding request. I hope that the Minister will consider that issue in his response.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate. I will speak on behalf of my 11-year-old constituent, Olivia, and describe a bit of her struggle. I congratulate her parents on fighting so hard for her, because the stress on families is incredible. We have heard from many hon. Members about the impact that PKU can have on the whole family and just how isolating it is. The National Society for Phenylketonuria is helping us as parliamentarians to get to grips with the issues.

We have heard how restrictive the diet is. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who is no longer in her place, talked about going to a pizza restaurant at the age of 18; Olivia is 11, but she is allowed only 8 grams of protein a day. She was fortunate enough to participate in the one-month trial of Kuvan, and she was found to be a responder. Her protein tolerance increased from 8g to 27g. On Kuvan, she had safe, low blood results and ate healthy, natural, normal vegetarian food. She could have baked beans at school on a Friday with a normal-sized portion of chips, just like her friends. It filled her plate—and her, instead of leaving her hungry. Her teachers commented on how bright and focused she was in lessons. Ironically, they asked, “What did she have for breakfast today?” Olivia loves life, and, during that month on Kuvan, it showed, just as it does for everyone else.

As many hon. Members have pointed out, it seems anomalous that a drug that is licensed in the US and the EU is still so difficult to obtain for our constituents. NHS England has handed the draft policy on commissioning Kuvan to NICE for review, but no date has been set. I press the Minister for a date, because it is absurd that Kuvan has been prescribed for years as a routine treatment in the rest of the developed world.

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Her family have done everything they could to support Denise. A few weeks ago, I spoke to her father, Norman, who recounted some of the traumas and difficulties that they experienced down the years. His view was that nothing could be done for Denise, but it seems that a treatment is now available.

I join hon. Members in their pleas with the Minister to use his good offices to ensure that the new life-changing drug Kuvan is made available so that the sufferers of PKU in the UK—like sufferers in other countries—can obtain the benefits of it and lead something approaching a normal life. Let us remember that we live in a wealthy nation; we are the sixth-biggest economy in the world.

PKU is a very rare condition that affects only a very few people in total across the country. The cost of the drug would be minimal in comparison to the life-changing impact it could bring about for young people—our fellow citizens. I plead with the Minister to listen to the impassioned pleas we have heard from Members today. He should use his good offices to ensure that the drug is made available so that we can change the lives of so many young people in our country who are suffering from this terrible condition.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We now come to the wind-ups. I would like to leave two minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up at the end.

10.30 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing time for this important debate and on her comprehensive and detailed summary of the issue. I am also grateful for the NSPKU briefing she kindly sent round to colleagues in advance of the debate. I must admit I had been in touch with Library specialists before I received the briefing to find out the pronunciation. The hon. Lady sensibly told us how to pronounce it. I will refer to it as PKU for the rest of the debate, despite my hatred of acronyms. It is fair to say that without that guidance, I would have been mispronouncing it.

I welcome the NSPKU members who are here to watch the debate. In preparation for the debate, I found out just how awful the condition is. I am grateful to all Members who have taken part and shared their constituent cases, which have helped highlight how truly horrendous the situation is. For my part, I am aware of no cases in my constituency, but as health is a devolved matter, they would more likely go to Scottish Parliament counterparts. We have heard that PKU is a rare inherited disorder sufferers of which are unable to break down the amino acid phenylalanine. It is a truly horrific condition, and it is worth putting on record that there is currently no cure. Left untreated, it can cause serious damage to the brain and nervous system, which can lead to learning disabilities and other symptoms. As has been pointed out, the condition affects about one in 10,000 babies in the UK. As the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) mentioned, the situation is worse in Scotland. The stats I have seen suggest that the condition affects one in every 8,000 babies in Scotland, which represents about six or seven cases a year.

Early intervention is vital. Without it, irreversible damage can occur. The Scottish Government take the condition seriously, which is why at around five days old, babies are offered newborn blood spot screening to check whether they have PKU or a number of other conditions. If PKU is confirmed, treatment will be given straight away to reduce the risk of serious complications. If the right treatment is followed, babies with PKU are well in early life and do not develop symptoms. It can be managed with a low protein diet, but as has been pointed out by many speakers today, that is far from an easy option.

We have heard much about access to new treatments such as sapropterin, also known as Kuvan, which is available in 25 countries and has been licensed in the EU since 2008. In May this year, Scotland’s Health Secretary Shona Robison wrote to the Health and Sport Committee to provide a further update on the Scottish Government’s progress in delivering the recommendations from the review of access to new medicines. She confirmed that the pharmaceutical company BioMarin has made a submission to the Scottish Medicines Consortium for sapropterin or Kuvan to be used for the treatment of PKU. The SMC will publish its advice within the next few weeks. Let us hope that we can see progress in the matter as a consequence of the Montgomery review and the definitions of new processes for ultra-orphan drugs.

Decisions made by the Scottish Medicines Consortium are independent of Ministers and the Scottish Parliament, and it is worth remembering that our involvement in that process can be limited, but I would be happy to offer my support to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire to do any joint working we can to bring pressure to bear, as the drug would be very beneficial for sufferers. The Scottish Government do not intervene in SMC processes, but they have sought to consider with all parties how issues identified in previous submissions could be resolved in new applications to achieve a best-value deal for NHS Scotland.

The Scottish Government have significantly increased access to new medicines in recent years. Between 2011 and 2013, the combined SMC acceptance rate for orphan cancer medicines was 48%. Between 2014 and 2016, the rate was 75% for ultra-orphan, orphan and end-of-life medicines. There are some positives that we can look at in that process. A responsible funding model is key, however. The Scottish Government are actively examining an improved negotiating function that seeks to ensure that the NHS in Scotland pays the same effective price for medicines as in the rest of the UK.

I thank everyone who has taken part. My sympathies go to anyone who is living with the condition. I would be interested in supporting the diet for a day challenge. My diet needs serious improvement at a range of levels, but I would be up for putting in the effort.

10.35 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate, for her excellent speech and for all her campaigning on the issue. I also thank all the Members who have spoken this morning. There has been a good number. I thank the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), my hon. Friend the
Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and for Derby North (Chris Williamson) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for their excellent contributions to this important debate.

I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on phenylketonuria, which is more commonly known as PKU. I understand the group was only recently set up by my hon. Friend for Blaydon and others. It is already providing an invaluable forum for PKU to be discussed. Finally, I thank the National Society for PKU for the help and support it provides to sufferers of PKU, for its sponsorship of medical research into PKU and for the work it does with medical professionals in the UK. Just last week, it held a particularly informative event in Parliament sponsored by my hon. Friend. I attended it, and I know it will have been helpful in spreading awareness of this extremely serious disease. I found it very useful, and I know other Members did, too.

I had not heard of PKU. It is a rare metabolic disease that causes an inability to break down the amino acid phenylalanine, which can then build up in the blood and brain. Left untreated, PKU causes severe intellectual disability, seizures and behavioural problems. Damage caused by the disease is, tragically, irreversible. That makes early diagnosis and treatment essential. The only treatment available on the NHS for PKU is an extremely restrictive diet. A PKU diet involves avoiding most forms of protein, and taking a special protein replacement—as we have heard, it does not taste as good as what it replaces—to avoid malnutrition. I would like to briefly highlight a number of the problems with the treatment.

First, it is extremely restrictive. Only a small number of foods can be eaten without severe limitation. It is easy to think that almost all food allergies and requirements are catered for in the modern supermarket these days, but with PKU that is not the case. Some of the necessary food replacements are available only by prescription. For some sufferers, the nature of the diet can have a detrimental impact on their social lives, particularly for younger people, as we have heard from a number of Members. Sadly, a high number of PKU patients also suffer from eating disorders and other mental health problems because of it. The NSPKU recommends that all people with PKU should automatically have follow-up appointments with an integrated specialist metabolic physical dietician, along with support from a psychologist and support worker. Is that something the Minister agrees with? Are the Government looking into providing that kind of support?

The second problem with the current available treatment is that it places a huge amount of pressure on those who care for children with PKU. In order to administer the necessary diet, a significant amount of measuring and preparation is required. As we heard at the event last week, dietary care takes on average 19 hours a week according to a recent study.

Catherine West: Is the shadow Minister aware that nearly 60% of mothers who care for their children with PKU have some kind of other psychological stress associated with this type of lifestyle?

Mrs Hodgson: I was not aware of that fact, but it is hardly surprising when we realise how complicated the diet is. As the child grows, the calculations have to be changed. As we know, children’s sizes change every week, so it is a constant battle to try to get it right, and it is not surprising that that figure is so high.

As the consequences of a child with PKU consuming the wrong type of food are so severe, it is easy to see how much stress a carer can go through in ensuring not only that they are preparing the right food but that a child follows the diet, particularly when away from home, as we have heard, or in school. With that in mind, I want to know whether the Minister believes that patient-centred care should be extended to school support, psychological support and counselling in order to relieve some of the pressure on carers.

When we consider the fact that the consequences of failing to adhere to the necessary diet are so extreme, one would imagine that all treatments that could improve outcomes would be available. Sadly, as we have heard, that is not the case. As has been discussed this morning, a non-dietary treatment for PKU does exist, yet it is not available to patients here in England. Kuvan is a licensed medicine that comes in the form of a simple tablet. In some 20% to 30% of people with PKU, taking Kuvan considerably increases the amount of protein that they can eat each day while maintaining a safe phenylalanine level. Indeed, some patients are able to stop or decrease the use of specially manufactured prescription foods while taking the drug. For those people, having access to Kuvan would literally change their lives and in some cases it would allow them to come off their restricted diet.

Unfortunately, the treatment is not currently commissioned by the NHS, except in a very small number of cases and for women during pregnancy. That is despite its having been licensed in the USA since 2007 and in the EU since 2008. It is used by thousands of patients across Europe and around the world. We heard the full list from the hon. Member for Chelmsford, but I will simply mention such countries as Ukraine, Estonia and Turkey by way of example. Many patients who suffer from PKU will rightly ask why, if the treatment is available there, it is not here?

Although Kuvan is available to women during pregnancy, it can be difficult to get hold of. Tragically, some women with PKU avoid having children altogether owing to fear of the risk to the foetus associated with high levels of phenylalanine. I understand that NHS England has recently referred Kuvan to NICE after it went through its internal clinical panel. Can the Minister explain why there has been such a delay in commissioning Kuvan, and when we can expect it to be available to all patients? Indeed, I understand that it was under the appraisal process in NHS England for seven years.

Access to Kuvan is not the only PKU treatment that has been impeded by the structure of the NHS. For sufferers of PKU, there is a significant risk of variable
outcomes and health inequalities, exacerbated by lack of access to special protein replacements and manufactured low-protein foods. Many PKU patients have reported difficulties in accessing the prescriptions they rely on, and some clinical commissioning groups have been found to actively restrict funding for PKU products. Has the Minister had any conversations with Public Health England and the CCGs to ensure that people with PKU have easy access to prescription-only foods and amino acid supplements?

As a parent who watched her children have the heel prick test as babies, I had no idea how important that test was. I had not heard of PKU back then and I thought the test was just a little test in which they check the hips and prick the heel. I can only imagine how it must feel to be the one out of 10,000 parents who receive a life-changing diagnosis for their child, only to find out that their life and the health of their child will be harder than they need to be because of what can only be described as rationing by their CCG and NHS England.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend the shadow Minister agree with me that it is a disgrace that it takes a court case to get the NHS, NICE and all the other bodies to respond, even when they have heard about the difficult times that families have? Does she agree that a family should not have to take the Government to court to get the treatment that their child needs?

Mrs Hodgson: I absolutely agree. It is shocking. I want to end by saying to all the campaigners here and across the country that I hope we have shown in this debate today that we are listening. All their campaigning has not been in vain. It has led to us having an amazing champion in my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon, and it has led to this well-attended debate today. The Minister has heard all the powerful speeches. He is a compassionate man, so they cannot fail to have had an impact on him. I look forward to his response. This is his opportunity to give hope to thousands of people. Let us hope that he does so.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): No pressure, then. I will try to give some hope.

Thank you, Mr Robertson, for chairing our debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for introducing the debate with such humanity. She speaks so well and passionately on this subject. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who mentioned the Irn-Bru issue. The Treasury has a policy on the sugar tax, which is part of our child obesity plan. We published the update on that yesterday. The policy long predates me. This subject has not been raised with me before, but we cannot let the bad be the enemy of the good. Taking sugar out of fizzy drinks is a good thing for society, but the unintended consequences of that need to be addressed, and he is right to raise it.

We also heard from the hon. Gentleman from my own county, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), from the hon. Members for Dudley North (Ian Austin), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Derby North (Chris Williamson), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who always speaks so passionately, from the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and, as always, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), all of whom—I think everybody— touched on the subject of Kuvan. Many touched on the dietary aspect and everybody gave personal examples of constituents. I hope to address all of those subjects.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon and the all-party group on the work that they do. When I was a Back Bencher I was involved in many all-party groups, including the APPG on breast cancer with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who speaks for the Opposition. So much of the good work of this place goes on in APPGs. I hope that the public watching inside and outside today can see that.

The House debated PKU and Kuvan in March this year, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who spoke well again today. I was not able to attend that debate in person back in March, so I am grateful to have the opportunity today to hear the issues around PKU and access to treatments. I have learnt a lot today, as I did in my reading ahead of today. The importance of rare diseases, of which PKU is one, is of course recognised by us and by policy makers and healthcare service providers in the UK and internationally, and rightly so. One in 17 of us will suffer from a rare disease at some point in our lives.

With the number of known rare diseases steadily growing as our diagnostic tools improve, the Government remain focused on and dedicated to improving the lives of those living with a rare condition. That was reinforced in the Prime Minister’s words last Monday at the Royal Free. I was fortunate to be there when she set out a vision for the long-term plan for the NHS, underpinned by increased funding for the service. She said the UK had an opportunity,

“to lead the world in the use of data and technology to prevent illness, not just treat it; to diagnose conditions before symptoms occur, and to deliver personalised treatment”,

informed by our own data, including our genetic make-up. I will say more about that in a moment.

Early and accurate diagnosis of rare conditions is essential for the best outcome for patients with rare diseases such as PKU. We know that without early treatment the outlook for those born with the condition is very poor, as the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, said. With early treatment, however, the outlook can be good, which is why, as a number of speakers have said, screening has such a vital role to play. I have two children, and equally watched the pin heel prick with trepidation—little did I know what it could have found. I had no idea what they were doing—I was in that daze—let alone what it could have found, so I have great compassion for people in that moment.

The current newborn screening programme in the UK is based on the blood spot test—the heel prick test that we have referred to—and screens for nine rare but serious conditions, including PKU. With that early
diagnosis, treatment can start straight away. For patients with the condition, that treatment includes a special diet and regular blood tests. We have heard so many incredible examples today.

We have heard how severely limiting a protein-restricted diet is and how difficult it must be for any patient to stick to, but particularly for young children. Those of us with young children can really feel that. Children with PKU, as has been said, cannot eat most of the foods that we all take for granted, such as meats, fish, milk and treats such as chocolate—everything in moderation—and that is just to name a few.

I stand here as a Minister, but also as a constituency MP. I, too, had not heard of PKU until constituents brought the condition to me. I recently met with one of my constituents, Sarah, who was a doctor and, like many people, as we have heard, had to give up her job to look after her children. Her three-year-old daughter, who is a beautiful little girl, lives with the condition. I heard first-hand of much of the daily strain that it puts on her daughter and the family. My constituent, like many carers, cares for the child full time—preparing the meals, calculating ingredients and going to doctor appointments—and has had to give up her career. As the hon. Member for Blydon said in her introduction, when we say that the condition can be treated by diet it sounds quite easy. However, in an email last night my constituent said to me,

“If she goes off ‘the diet’, she will suffer permanent and irreversible brain damage.”

If my seven-year-old boy goes off diet and drinks a fizzy drink we certainly suffer the consequences, but it usually lasts for only an hour. I have a great understanding from today’s debate about that.

I understand that even in adulthood, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd said, PKU can cause harrowing symptoms that make any attempt at a normal life and contributing to society very difficult and sometimes impossible. The availability of specially formulated low-protein foods and nutritional supplements through the NHS is therefore vital. Since its development in the 50s, it has saved the lives of and improved outcomes for many patients.

I cannot deny that PKU is not on the list of medical conditions in England that are exempt from prescription charges. As such, only the usual age-related pre-paid certificate exemptions apply to such patients. That is the current situation, but everything can be challenged and can change. As I said at the start, the power of the all-party groups is incredible, and perhaps that is something that the all-party group may wish to look at and campaign on.

An awful lot of information is available. My constituent Sarah is also the editor of the National Society for Phenylketonuria’s magazine. She sent me the summer 2018 edition last night, which I read overnight. It was a really interesting read, and I might touch on a couple of things in it before I close. That magazine and its website contain all sorts of information on foodstuffs, advertisements for foodstuffs, products and recipes—and yes, avocado does keep coming up.

**Catherine West:** Will the Minister give way?

**Steve Brine:** I will briefly, but then that will be it, because I know hon. Members want to hear from me, as the Minister. We have heard from Back Benchers.

**Catherine West:** As the Minister knows, there have been five applications for an individual funding request. Two of those were allowed and one, which I mentioned earlier in the debate, had to go to the High Court. The judge declared that the decision that had been made was irrational and unlawful. Will the Minister not just speak about the dietary supplements, which we can all find out from Google, but about what he is doing to push these requests? Specifically, what is he doing on behalf of Olivia, aged 11, whose mother is here today, who would like to know whether he will personally support her application for Kuvan?

**Steve Brine:** I was going to come on to talk about Kuvan; obviously, I stopped to listen to the hon. Lady’s intervention. No, I will not personally support an individual request. That would not be appropriate for a Minister at the Dispatch Box. That is not how our system works, but if she wishes to write to me with the specific example then of course I will see that she gets a reply. That should be handled through the right processes. I know that the processes for individual funding request applications are sometimes torturous, and I am sure that we could do them better.

Let us touch on Kuvan, which everybody has raised. It is one treatment option that has been found to lower blood phenylalanine levels in some patients with mild or moderate PKU. We know that the drug is effective in a small number of patients, depending on their genetic make-up, and is more likely to benefit those with milder forms of the condition. If patients respond to treatment, it is likely that they will still need to continue with some form of dietary restrictions—everyone understands that.

As we have heard, Kuvan is not currently routinely commissioned for use in children and adults. That is due to the lack of evidence of its effectiveness on nutritional status and cognitive development at the time the policy was developed in 2015. NHS England does, however, have a commissioning policy for PKU patients with the most urgent clinical need—namely, pregnant women, as we have heard.

**Vicky Ford:** Will the Minister give way?

**Steve Brine:** No, I will not. Although the decision taken by NHS England was not to commission Kuvan routinely, the system has the flexibility to review that decision if new evidence emerges. As the House heard during the debate in March, NHS England received a preliminary policy proposal for the use of Kuvan in the management of PKU for adults and children, because new evidence has now been published to support its use. Kuvan was subsequently referred to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for assessment through its topic selection process—the process through which NICE prioritises topics for appraisal in its technology appraisal or highly specialised technology programme.

The NICE process is important. It is independent of Ministers and provides a standardised, governed procedure to ensure that NICE addresses topics that are important to the patient population, carers, professionals and commissioners and, similarly, helps to make the best
use of NHS resources. To update the House on progress, Kuvan has progressed through the first stage of the topic selection, and NICE is currently considering whether the drug should proceed to the draft scope creation stage. We are expecting that decision to be taken in the autumn. I will press NICE, along with the relevant Minister in the Department—the Under-Secretary who sits in the other place—to bring that to a conclusion as swiftly as possible.

People have asked today for me to personally get involved in access to Kuvan. NICE’s process is important and sits independently of Ministers. It would be a very strange situation if Ministers were able to sit in the Department of Health and, like a Roman emperor, give a thumbs up or thumbs down. I do not think that any Minister in this Government or previous Governments would want to be in that inappropriate position. As I said, we expect the decision to be taken in the autumn and we will press for that to be brought to a conclusion as soon as possible.

I will give the hon. Member for Blaydon time to wind up the debate, but let me say first that there are other promising treatments on the horizon. NICE is currently considering pegvaliase, an enzyme substitution therapy indicated for adults, through its topic selection process, and recently consulted stakeholders on its suitability for the technology appraisal. I can update the House that a scoping workshop on this topic is scheduled to take place tomorrow, 27 June.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said that there had not been a response on BioMarin. She mentioned that point to me last night, and I am worried to hear it. As I said, Kuvan is currently going through the independent NICE assessment. If the topic goes ahead, there will be many opportunities for BioMarin to engage in commercial discussions, as per NICE’s usual process. BioMarin and NHS England are already in discussions about a number of other drugs, so it has the opportunity to raise the issue. However, it seems to me that NHS England could at least communicate better, because no answer sounds like a bad answer. I will take that away from the debate and ensure that it happens ASAP.

I know you want me to stop, Mr Robertson, and let the hon. Member for Blaydon close the debate, so I will do that.

10.58 am

**Liz Twist:** What can I say in less than one and a half minutes? I thank all hon. Members who have taken part today. I thank the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Derby North (Chris Williamson), the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the Minister for his reply.

I am rather disappointed that we did not have a bit more promising news on the future of Kuvan, but we will be back; we will ensure that the Minister hears from us again, and we will continue our campaign. Finally, I thank all the families who are here today to show how strongly people feel about the issue. I thank everyone for attending. The issue will not go away. We will be back and will keep pushing this agenda.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered access to treatment, support and innovative new medicines for phenylketonuria patients.

**Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair):** Would hon. Members leaving please do so quietly? Thank you. We have another debate.
North Wales Police and Nicholas Churton

11 am

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered North Wales Police, probation and the murder of Nicholas Churton.

It is a pleasure to be here, and to address you in the chair, Mr Robertson. I always hesitate to bring up individual cases in the House, but this extremely serious case involved the death of one of my constituents. I hesitated to raise the matter because it brings grief and sad memories to his family, but I have notified them of the debate, and I think there are profound matters of public interest in the case that need to be raised.

The primary responsibility of our criminal justice system is to keep people safe, and this case highlights where it did not do so. I will ask questions about why that happened, who was responsible and how we will respond to serious failures in the system in future.

My constituent Nicholas Churton was 67 when he was brutally murdered in his own home in the middle of Wrexham in March 2017. He was murdered by Jordan Davidson, who had a long history of offending, and was, at the time, on licence and serving a sentence of three years for burglary. While still in prison, Davidson received a further 12-month prison sentence for possession of a knife. He was released in December 2016 on licence. Following Davidson’s release, Nicholas Churton complained on a number of occasions to the police about Davidson’s conduct. According to the prosecuting barrister at his trial, Davidson knew that.

In March 2017, just four months after being released on licence, Davidson was arrested for another offence of possession of a knife. None the less, he was released by the police in Wrexham on bail, without having a court appearance. Within three days of his release by the police, Davidson went on a spree, committing serious offences, which culminated in Mr Churton’s murder in his own home in a hammer attack. Davidson’s trial was for not only murder, but four offences of assault and two of robbery, as well as offences of aggravated burglary, attempted burglary, burglary and aggravated vehicle taking.

Davidson pleaded guilty to Mr Churton’s murder and many of the other offences. The offences were so serious that the Attorney General appealed against the tariff imposed by the judge on the ground that it was too lenient. The Court of Appeal agreed with that appeal and increased the sentence.

I am grateful to local journalist Jez Hemmings of the Daily Post in north Wales for highlighting the facts of this dreadful case, which were revealed in court. As the Member of Parliament for the constituency where the dreadful incidents occurred, I contacted North Wales police and asked for a private briefing. The chief constable told me that that was not possible because the Independent Office for Police Conduct had started an inquiry into the case to address why the police had not adequately responded to Mr Churton’s complaints about Mr Davidson before the attack. I made it clear that I was very concerned about the extraordinary decision to release Davidson from police custody when he was arrested for possession of an offensive weapon, and asked why that had happened despite Davidson’s long criminal history. I also wanted to understand the role of the community rehabilitation company and the probation services that were dealing with the prisoner on licence, to ensure that adequate systems are in place to protect my constituents. Despite that, the police would not meet me.

That approach is unacceptable and disrespectful of the role of a local Member of Parliament. The police and crime commissioner in north Wales will not meet individual constituents to discuss their cases, unlike Members of Parliament. It is quite clear that the advent of the office of the police and crime commissioner has diminished the accountability of the chief constable to MPs in north Wales. The chief constable has a much more distant relationship with MPs than they did when I was first elected.

Given the Attorney General’s involvement in the appeal and my continued concern about not being properly informed about the facts of the case, I wrote to the Attorney General and pointed out the detail of the case and its seriousness. I am grateful for the response that I received from the Home Office. Following my intervention, the Independent Office for Police Conduct announced a second inquiry, into the decision to release Davidson on police bail. Until I intervened, that matter was not the subject of such an inquiry. I am glad that it is now, but I am not certain that the matter would have been investigated if I had not intervened.

I am pleased to say that, unlike the police, the probation service, which is also involved in the matter, agreed to meet me privately to discuss my concerns about the supervision of those on licence from custody. I fully understand that there are limitations on the information that can be disclosed to a Member of Parliament, but given the appalling set of circumstances that led to the offences, it is entirely appropriate that the MP should be closely involved in ensuring that his or her constituents are safe.

Of course, the set of incidents and the situation with the probation system and the police have a political context that it is important to raise. Since 2010, we have had large reductions in the numbers of police officers on the streets of Wrexham, in common with everywhere else in the UK, which necessarily means that individual police officers are under more pressure in providing a police service. That is a political decision that the Government made, for which they need to be held accountable.

Further, in 2014 and 2015, the Government introduced major structural changes in the probation system. That included changes to who delivered probation services and what was delivered as part of probation, which is clearly relevant to the supervision of prisoners on licence. The reforms were known as Transforming Rehabilitation, and sought to extend statutory rehabilitation to offenders serving custodial sentences of less than 12 months; to introduce nationwide “through the gate” resettlement services for those leaving prison; to open up the market to new rehabilitation providers to get the best out of the public, voluntary and private sectors; to introduce new payment incentives for market providers to focus relentlessly on reforming offenders; to split the delivery of probation services between the national probation service for offenders at high risk of harm and community rehabilitation companies for low and medium-risk offenders; and to reduce offending.

Like many others, I was deeply concerned at the time about the impact that this huge set of reforms would have. I was very aware that they were introduced without
additional resources, despite the fact that a group of prisoners on short prison sentences and people who had been released from prison who would not have received supervision previously were expected to receive it under the new system. I was particularly concerned about how we would determine which individuals would be supervised, and which body would do it. Jordan Davidson—the murderer in this case, who had a long criminal history and had been given a relatively short sentence—was one such individual.

The more I look at this case, the more I think that the reforms contributed to the failure of supervision that led to Jordan Davidson’s release on bail and on licence after the serious offence of possession of an offensive weapon, to the subsequent assaults he carried out, and to the death of my constituent, Nicholas Churton.

Last week, after I applied for this debate, the Justice Committee published its excellent report, “Transforming Rehabilitation”, which looked at the probation reforms and was compiled without knowledge of this case. It said:

“We are unconvinced that splitting offenders by risk was the right way to split the probation system. Splitting the system in such a way does not recognise that the risk of harm an individual poses can change over time.”

It continued:

“The splitting of probation services between the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies has complicated the delivery of probation services and created a ‘two-tier’ system. Although we heard about joint working going on at a local and national level, problems in the relationship remain.”

Crucially—this is very relevant to this case—it said:

“We are concerned that problems remain regarding data sharing across the criminal justice system.”

I believe that Jordan Davidson’s case highlights many of those issues.

Why did the police not share data about a man who had offensive weapon convictions and a long history of offending, and had been the subject of complaints by Nicholas Churton in the recent past? When Davidson was arrested for another offensive weapon offence, why was he released without even a court appearance? What system was in operation for the supervision of offenders that allowed all this to happen? No single person is responsible for the system, but the then Secretary of State for Justice was a vocal proponent of the change, responsible for the system, but the then Secretary of State for Justice was a vocal proponent of the change, which was based on the review.

Crucially—one is very relevant to this case—it said:

“We are concerned that problems remain regarding data sharing across the criminal justice system.”

I believe that Jordan Davidson’s case highlights many of those issues.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) for securing this debate and for setting out the terrible facts of this very sad case. The Attorney General referred it to the Court of Appeal because of the inadequacy of the initial sentence. The Court of Appeal’s judgment makes for very stark, sobering reading. I extend my sincere condolences to the family of Mr Churton, who was the victim of the most horrendous attack in his home. He was clearly targeted by Davidson because he was elderly and vulnerable, and he was unable to defend himself against Davidson’s ferocity. Davidson is now rightly serving a life sentence with a tariff of 30 years for his wicked murder of Mr Churton.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues and made a political link to this case, with which I am afraid I do not agree. I am going to break down those issues. As Jordan Davidson was subject to statutory probation supervision at the time, the Wales community rehabilitation company had to complete a serious further offence review, which identified a number of areas where the practice of those responsible for monitoring Mr Davidson fell below the expected standards. Indeed, there were significant failings. Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service is now overseeing the CRC’s implementation of the improvement actions from that review. Senior officials from the CRC met members of Mr Churton’s family in March and shared with them the victim summary report, which was based on the review.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice will consider the Justice Committee’s recommendations carefully and will respond in due course. This was a significant programme of reform. For instance, 40,000 people who would not previously have been monitored and supervised were expected to receive it under the new system. I was particularly concerned about how we would determine which individuals would be supervised, and which body would do it. Jordan Davidson—the murderer in this case, who had a long criminal history and had been given a relatively short sentence—was one such individual.

In short, the situation is a mess, and there have been appalling consequences. We need clear answers, and the former Secretary of State, the police and the bodies tasked with probation and protecting the public must accept responsibility. Only in that way can the public be confident that such a dreadful case will not happen again.

11.14 am
I urge the hon. Gentleman to press the police and crime commissioner further and insist that he discusses this case with him, because it is obviously so important to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents.

As the hon. Gentleman is aware, there are two Independent Office for Police Conduct investigations into North Wales police’s involvement. I am not in a position to comment on them while they are ongoing, but I am sure that when those reports are handed down, the policing Minister will be pleased to discuss them with the hon. Gentleman to see what further improvements can be made.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of funding. I wish that we did not have to view policing just through the prism of funding, but that seems to be the only line of debate on policing that Opposition Members wish to pursue. I am conscious that I am constrained by the fact that there are two live IOPC investigations. He described funding as a political decision; I must remind him why that decision had to be made. I would not have raised funding in this context, but he has, so I am obliged to put it on record that the reason those hard decisions had to be made was the economic mess in which we found ourselves when the last Labour Government left office.

We are very conscious of the pressures that the police have been under in the last few years, which is precisely why the then Home Secretary protected spending in 2015, and why it has been protected since then. This year, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has spoken to every constabulary in the country. With the help of police and crime commissioners, we have secured an extra £460 million of funding for police forces.

I am sorry that the Minister takes exception to me raising funding. I do not accept her description of the position in 2010. In 2010, the Conservative Government reduced policing funding for 2010 to 2015 on the basis that the policies that they were pursuing would eliminate our budget deficit by 2015. That policy failed, but none the less we suffered the imposition of cuts between 2010 and 2016. It is fair to individual police officers to point out in a debate such as this where I have made criticisms that they are under more pressure now than they were in 2010. That is a fact.

Victoria Atkins: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman talks about political decisions; presumably it is a political decision by the police and crime commissioner not to spend that money on frontline policing.

I am very conscious of the gravity of this case; frankly, there are times when the public want us just to get on with it and sort things out, rather than have these back and forth arguments about funding. The fact is that we have protected spending and it is now increasing this year by £460 million. Any police and crime commissioner or chief constable who wants to spend that money on frontline policing however they see fit for their local area will have our support. That is their decision.

Data sharing sadly is a point raised not just in this context but in other cases, where there are serious incidents of violence and it emerges that various agencies involved in the run-up to an incident did not share information in the way that we would wish. To declare the fact that agencies can and should share information for safeguarding purposes, we amended the Data Protection Act to include a statement to that effect. I hope that will provide reassurance to those agencies that hold information—not just the police but social services, the medical profession and others. That may help to safeguard children or vulnerable adults. I hope that amendment to the Act will give them comfort, enable them to do that and create a culture in which agencies realise that in certain circumstances, they are allowed to share information where it may help to keep people safe. I hope that change will reassure the hon. Gentleman and Mr Churton’s family for the future.

I want to praise the actions of two police officers in North Wales. During Mr Davidson’s tirade of crime in the aftermath of the murder, police constables Rhys Rushby and David Hall arrested Mr Davidson and were very badly injured in the process. They were extraordinarily brave, selfless and devoted to their duty. I was very pleased to hear that their bravery has been recognised not just by their own force but in their nomination for a national police bravery award. I give them my thanks and wish them the best of luck in that ceremony. This is just one example of the daily dangers faced by our police officers. We must thank them for facing them.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is an assiduous constituency MP; we have met to discuss other issues relating to behaviour in and around his constituency. He has raised this important issue because he wants to ensure that the thoughts of the Churton family are heard and, just as importantly, that actions are taken by the agencies involved to ensure that these terrible mistakes are not repeated. I thank him for his contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.
Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

[IAN PAISLEY in the Chair]

2.40 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): It is extremely stifling in here today. If hon. Members wish to remove their jackets, I will permit that, given the heat. I know we will probably generate more heat and light during the debate. This is also a highly subscribed debate, so I ask people to bear that in mind when they make their introductory remarks. I will try to get everyone in, if possible, but quite a lot of Members wish to speak. I will try to accommodate everyone; if we can keep interventions to a minimum, that will help.

Graham Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Paisley. This is a DFID debate rather than a Foreign and Commonwealth Office debate, and I am glad that the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), is present to bring his expertise to bear.

The situation for Gaza and its 1.7 million residents is appalling and inhumane, but before I turn to some of the specific concerns of the many in Gaza and the wider Palestinian community, I will briefly comment on the events of the past few months. Many hon. Members will be aware that there have been multiple protests along the border with Israel as part of the “Great March of Return”. The start marked the 70th anniversary of the exodus of as many as 750,000 Palestinians, many of whom were driven from their homes during the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. According to Medical Aid for Palestinians, approximately 14,600 people have been injured by Israeli forces, and 55% of those were hospitalised. Tragically, 118 Palestinians were killed, including 14 children. Elsewhere, including in the west bank, a further 17 Palestinians were killed during the same period, including five reportedly shot at the fence or after crossing into Israel.

In particular, I pay tribute to Razan al-Najjar, a 21-year-old volunteer for a medical team helping wounded protesters, who was shot dead near Khan Younis. Razan was fatally shot in the neck while clearly wearing a medical staff uniform. That is a war crime, as the Palestinian Health Minister, Dr Jawad Awawdeh, has said. Razan was brave and inspirational, and will be remembered as such, but it is our responsibility as politicians in the UK Parliament to try to ensure that those responsible are held to account for her death. Dr Andy Ferguson, who is MAP’s director of programmes and was present at Gaza’s largest hospital, Al-Shifa, on Monday 14 May, said the following about what he witnessed:

“Any hospital in the UK would be utterly overwhelmed by such a massive influx of injuries as we saw in Gaza. Amid dwindling supplies of medicines and equipment and Gaza’s chronic electricity shortages, hospitals in Gaza were in crisis even before the protests began. It is testimony to the motivation and skills of medical teams in Gaza that, despite this, hospitals were able to keep receiving, triaging, referring and treating patients—both the newly-wounded and the hospital’s standard patient workload.”

Although it is apparent that some protesters may have engaged in some form of violence, that does not justify the use of live ammunition. International law is clear: firearms can only be used to protect against an imminent threat of death or serious injury. In some instances, Israeli forces appear to have committed wilful killings, constituting war crimes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend will recall that I asked the Minister a question—I think it was about a fortnight ago—about an inquiry into what had been happening there. That was to go to the United Nations, but when it got to the UN, the British Government sat on their hands. What does my hon. Friend think about that?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention and I am pleased that the Minister is here. He has some responsibilities and I hope we will have some answers. We need to have an inquiry and to hold those responsible to account, because Israeli forces were using not only live ammunition, but high-velocity weapons in particular, causing absolute maximum harm. Another issue of concern is that the UK Government have approved more than £490 million-worth of arms exports to Israel since 2014.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): According to the latest figures from the UN, since 30 March this year, 135 Palestinians, including children, have been killed and thousands injured, half of them seriously, as a result of the use of live ammunition. Does my hon. Friend agree with Amnesty International, which has renewed its call on Governments worldwide to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Israel following the country’s extreme response to the mass demonstrations along the fence separating the Gaza strip from Israel?

Grahame Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is about not just the sale of high-powered rifles but the type of ammunition that is being used, all of which has been licensed. The licences include categories of arms and arms components such as sniper rifles, assault rifles, surveillance and armed drones, and grenade launchers. As yet, the use of UK-manufactured weapons in the current atrocities has yet to be verified, but US-supplied weapons of the same type are clearly being used by Israeli forces to kill and maim Palestinians.

The export controls under which our Government operate clearly state that export licences should not be approved if there is a clear risk that the weapons might be used in violation of international law or for internal repression. From the Government’s own figures, it is hard to see how current sales of military and security equipment to Israel are not in breach of those obligations, which comes back to my hon. Friend’s point. The Israeli Government must rein in the military to prevent the further loss of life and serious injuries, and the UK Government must immediately suspend all their current arms sales to Israel and support international efforts to set up a comprehensive arms embargo that applies to Israel, Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups.

The UN Human Rights Council has condemned “the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by the Israeli occupying forces against Palestinian civilians,” and called for the urgent establishment of an “international commission of inquiry” to investigate the killing of Palestinians during the protests. In my opinion, it shames
the UK Government that the UK abstained on the vote, objecting to the omission of references to Hamas and its role in the violence. The UK has, however, separately called for a full and independent inquiry. Indeed, the Minister told the House:

“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 death toll alone warrants such a comprehensive inquiry.”—[Official Report, 21 May 2018; Vol. 641; c. 579.]

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It would be extremely useful to see the rules of engagement issued to the Israel Defence Forces; I wonder whether anyone has a copy of them.

Grahame Morris: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. However, certain principles apply in relation to the use of lethal force. It is clear that the Israeli security forces’ response has been completely disproportionate, as demonstrated by the death toll and the huge number of Palestinians with gunshot wounds, many of whom are in a very serious condition and will have permanently disabling injuries as a result.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Is he aware of the high committee of the “Great March of Return”, which includes Hamas, posting on Facebook a request that people bring a knife or gun to the protests? Does he agree that it is a distortion of the truth to ignore the role of Hamas in this violence?

Grahame Morris: I condemn violence and I condemn those who advocate it on all sides. I have seen some appalling quotes from prominent Israeli politicians that are equally worthy of condemnation, so I condemn Hamas and I condemn those responsible on the Israeli side.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The last time we debated this in the Chamber, I asked the Minister if we had any statistics on Palestinians being arrested, but he was unable to give them. Those statistics would indicate whether the Israeli forces’ approach to the protest was one of “shoot to kill” or of arresting the protesters. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be looked into?

Grahame Morris: I know that my hon. Friend will be aware that the former Conservative Prime Minister described Gaza as the world’s biggest open-air prison. That narrative has changed, as has the policy of the Government, who seem increasingly apologetic about the Israeli Government’s actions. I welcome the Government’s reference to an international inquiry, but they are shirking responsibility given our history in that country and region. I call on the Minister and his Department to work in the spirit he has always shown rather than ducking and diving, as has happened over the past few years.

Grahame Morris: I absolutely agree. I hope that we will hear some positive responses from the Minister. Until Israel ensures effective and independent investigations that result in the criminal prosecutions of those responsible, the International Criminal Court must open a formal investigation into these killings and serious injuries as possible war crimes and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

The debate relates to the work of DFID, and the protests, attacks and deaths merely shadow a wider issue, which is that many Palestinians live a miserable life because of the Gaza blockade. It has now been 11 years since the closure of Gaza, which was intensified by Israel’s imposition of a land, sea and air blockade.

Despite Israel’s removal of its settlements in Gaza in 2005, it retains effective control over both the territory and its population. It therefore remains the occupying power, with all the humanitarian and legal responsibilities resulting from the fourth Geneva convention, including for the Gaza population’s access to adequate healthcare, the provision of medical supplies and the functioning of medical establishments. Hospitals in Gaza are suffering a drastic deficit in medical disposable equipment and vital drugs. The World Health Organisation warned that the health system in Gaza is “on the brink of collapse”, with more than 40% of essential medicines completely depleted, as well as shortages of electricity and fuel for generators.

Permission approval is needed from Israel for patients seeking urgent treatment outside Gaza. Last year saw the lowest rate of permit approvals for Palestinian patients since records began, causing the avoidable tragedy of the deaths of at least 54 people after the denial or delay of their permits.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and informed speech, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. He is absolutely right to say that healthcare is on the brink of closure, but so are other vital services, such as energy, schools and sewage management. Despite humanitarian efforts over 11 years, the situation has worsened year on year. Will he ask the Minister to set out what concrete steps he will take to end this illegal blockade?
Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

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Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making important points about the desperate humanitarian conditions faced by Gazans. However, unless he is willing to mention that the disruption to energy supplies for Gazans has much to do with the ongoing dispute between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the west bank, that the Rafah crossing is hardly ever opened to allow humanitarian supplies in from Egypt, or that Hamas runs Gaza with an iron fist and is guilty of numerous counts of misappropriating aid, we will not get the balanced discussion that this important issue needs.

I know that the Minister shares my concerns, but we need to do more. We need to step up to the plate for the Gazans. We cannot allow the desperate situation of these innocent people to continue. Taking no action will be counterproductive. It will simply strengthen the position of those who advocate extremism. We need to hear a stronger voice from the UK in the international community.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

Gaza’s unemployment rate is almost 50%, which is the world’s highest, while 97% of households lack access to clean drinking water. There has been a threefold increase of diarrhoea among under-threes, and in contrast to the global improvement in infant mortality the rate in Gaza has actually stagnated for a decade. Mains electricity is available for only four or five hours a day—less under certain circumstances—which undermines vital services and severely inhibits people’s everyday lives and wellbeing. Some 109 million litres of waste water is released into the sea every day, and almost the whole of the Gaza coastline is contaminated.

I wish to make a brief contribution. I speak today as a long-standing member of the Conservative Middle East Council and, now, its president, and as someone who has travelled extensively in the middle east for many years. At the beginning of my speech, I want to make it clear that I believe absolutely in Israel and I believe without qualification in the statehood of Palestine. I want to see a secure Israel alongside a viable and independent Palestine. However, I want today to express my deep concern about the truly appalling humanitarian conditions in the west bank and most particularly in Gaza.

In the 35 years that I have been a Member of Parliament, I have taken a very close interest in the middle east, with all its endless shifting alliances, problems and disasters, and it has always seemed to me quite unbelievable that a nation such as Israel—a nation that is cultured, sophisticated and democratic, that has triumphed over so much and whose people have, down the centuries, suffered so dreadfully—should even consider tolerating the grotesque situation that pertains in Gaza and the serious harm, desperate squalor and cruelty that the people there live with. It is immoral and contrary to all humanitarian norms. Israel acts with seeming impunity, imposing what is in effect a collective punishment on Gaza. Israeli actions against the Palestinians are legally and morally wrong and must be condemned, but more importantly, they must be put right. It is not enough just to express concern and to go on expressing concern. I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who is indeed my friend and who has a deep and profound understanding of the middle east, that I look to him for something stronger.

A democratic, sophisticated Israel should know much better than to do what it is doing at the moment, not only in its recent violent behaviour towards the Palestinians—the position was very well expressed by the hon. Member for Easington—but as it continues to expropriate, absolutely illegally and against all advice from all its friends and its opponents, land for settlements. This year is the 70th anniversary of what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba—the terrible catastrophe that befell them, in which most of Palestine’s Arab population fled or were driven from their homes during Israel’s creation in 1948. Since 2007, an illegal Israeli-imposed blockade and three major wars have wreaked havoc on Gaza’s economy, its infrastructure and, above all, its people. Unemployment in Gaza stands at 43%; 39% of Gaza’s 2 million Palestinians live in abject poverty, with 80% dependent on international food aid for their very survival. If that is not enough, 97% of Gaza’s entire water supply is contaminated by sewage and seawater. According to the United Nations, on top of all that are hopelessly inadequate health services. Essentially, the Gaza strip has been made uninhabitable and unliveable.
It is clear that the ongoing split between Fatah and Hamas has paralysed Palestinian politics, made it much harder to make any progress, and rendered very difficult reconstruction efforts in Gaza. However, the House should express today our unqualified and unresolved anger and our shock that Gaza should be kept as it is, with a devastated economy and desperate humanitarian needs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I will not, if the hon. Lady will forgive me, because I am coming to the end of my speech and many hon. Members want to speak.

I know many Israelis and many Jews in this country who are deeply, abidingly, desperately ashamed of their country’s behaviour—that wonderful, extraordinary country’s behaviour—in this respect, and we should not in the House let this moment pass without most strongly condemning such dreadful and barbaric behaviour.

3.5 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing it. It is also a pleasure to be under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

Last week, Jamie McGoldrick, the director of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, spoke to the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group here. A very experienced UN diplomat, he took over recently, and he gave us a horrific picture of both the current and the long-term situation in Gaza. As has been said, there is very little electricity or clean water. There are appalling levels of unemployment, poverty and reliance on aid. One statistic that he gave stuck in my mind. It was that 1,700 people were shot in one day. It is not just the 135 people who have been killed but the thousands of people who have been injured recently. We are talking about really quite unimaginable figures.

Nearly 15,000 people have been injured, and the injuries of a large number of those—4,000—related to the use of live ammunition. This is firing into largely unarmed crowds of people who do not pose a threat to the state of Israel.

We can go back 200 or 100 years to events in our own history, such as Peterloo and Amritsar, in which the military engaged in attacking civilian populations. The idea that that is happening now in a country that says it is a democracy and is an ally of this country is just horrific. I am waiting to hear the condemnation that we should hear on this, because it relates to an illegal occupation that has gone on for 60 years. What has happened over the last 25 years—long before Hamas came on the scene—is the separation of Gaza from the west bank so that a Palestinian state becomes impossible. It is no longer possible to travel, not just for health reasons but for any reason at all, out of Gaza. In effect, the people of Gaza are being told, “You are sealed off. You will continue to be occupied. You will be subjugated and humiliated, but you will no longer have the right, just as people in East Jerusalem do not have the right, to travel to the west bank.” This is the fracturing of Palestinian integrity and society in a way that is clearly deliberate.

Debbie Abrahams: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will give way—no, having looked at Mr Paisley, I will not; that was a stern shake of the head.

I end by asking this one question. Tomorrow Omar Shakir, a director of Human Rights Watch, will appear before an Israeli court. Can the Minister deal with the question of whether there will be British attendance there from the consulate or the embassy? It is important that voices in Israel speaking up against what is happening are defended and supported, because otherwise the truth simply does not get out. I ask the Government to do their bit, not just in condemning, but in supporting those who are trying to make a difference to the lives of people in Gaza.

3.8 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate, although I am saddened that this contribution is on a fraught and hostile topic that concerns many of my Jewish constituents in Southport. I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I recently made a trip to Israel and the west bank with a number of colleagues—a trip that I will refer to.

Last Wednesday, a rocket exploded outside a nursery in southern Israel. No children were hurt, but the rocket was one of 45 fired from the Gaza strip that day. In recent weeks, dozens of balloons and kites with explosives attached to them have floated into Israel. One landed on a children’s trampoline. Fortunately, no children were hurt. We rarely hear about violence emanating from the west bank or the deprivation there. I ask hon. Members to consider why. What is the difference between the two territories? The answer is simple. Whereas the Palestinian Authority want to create a lasting peace, the regime that controls Gaza wants to wage war against the Jewish people. Such hatred informs its decisions, which worsen the lives of ordinary Gazans.

Even more worrying is the anti-Semitism of Hamas. If we want to understand the humanitarian situation in Gaza, we need to appreciate the importance of the hatred that drives Hamas to launch bombs attached to balloons in the direction of innocent children. Since its foundation, Hamas has promoted the sort of perverse anti-Semitic stereotypes that some in our own country now believe. Its original charter accused the Jews of controlling Governments and triggering wars between them. It asserted that the Jewish people needed to be broken and their dream of a Jewish state destroyed. Even its revised charter denies Israel’s right to exist.

Such unrelenting hatred causes obvious concern in Israel, but it creates only misery for Gaza. It is the reason why Hamas hides its weapons in the homes of innocent people; why it fires rockets from unprotected schools and hospitals; and why it channels tens of millions of dollars of international aid into maintaining a network of tunnels that penetrate Israel. This year I had the opportunity to see one of those tunnels. Only by seeing it can a person comprehend the true scale of the terror infrastructure that Hamas has created. It is nothing like what many anti-Semitic commentators would have us believe. The tunnels are not built to assist those
who might be fleeing. They are the product of sophisticated technical engineering, built with the purpose of supporting Hamas in achieving a prescribed outcome. Concrete slabs support the walls and ceilings of the passageways, many of which have electric wiring and lighting.

It is right that we concern ourselves with the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, yet I ask hon. Members to keep in mind what continues to make the humanitarian situation in Gaza unfavourable. Is it a lack of support by the international community? No. Is it the chronic shortage of humanitarian funding? No. It is the anti-Semitic hatred of Hamas that keeps Gaza in its current pitiful state.

3.12 pm  
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I want to associate myself with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). The hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) talked about seeing Gaza for ourselves. I have recently been to Israel and to the Palestinian territories. Seeing it for myself can go into Gaza and see it for ourselves.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith raised the case of Omar Shakir from Human Rights Watch. It appears that there is a closing down of dialogue, which is aimed at silencing human rights voices in the west bank and Gaza. The only way in which we can exert power to try to change that is through the use of our missions in the region. I urge Ministers to seek support in the case regarding Omar Shakir’s deportation, and to urge the missions to attend tomorrow’s court case in Jerusalem. Something must be done, so that we are not left guessing about the propaganda and the different groups. Let us call a spade a spade. We are all associated with different groups that have different feelings and ideologies on this issue, but we can put all that aside. I watched myself and the people I travelled with put some of our preconceived ideas aside when faced with the reality. I ask the Minister to try to make sure that we can go into Gaza and see it for ourselves.

3.15 pm  
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is severe and extremely difficult, and I am pleased we are having this debate. I want to focus first on the good work that is being done. We often think the problems are insurmountable and ignore the really serious efforts to improve the situation. Israel has doubled the amount of water it provides to Gaza to relieve the water crisis that Gazans face. Furthermore, Israeli healthcare and charitable bodies continue to provide their services to Palestinians. Some 6,000 children have been examined in the weekly cardiology clinic run by Save a Child’s Heart in the city of Holon. Each day, around 700 trucks of supplies of medication, food and building materials enter Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing. In total, 10 million tonnes of construction material have been delivered to Gaza since 2014. Those are all positive signs.

Debbie Abrahams: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s giving way. The World Health Organisation has stated that in Gaza, there is only a month’s supply of half of the items needed for essential medicines, and of a third of essential disposables. Does he find that acceptable?

Jack Lopresti: These things are extremely difficult and it is not up to me to say whether that is acceptable. I will simply highlight what I think is happening to some of the resources directed towards Gaza.

As I said, there are positive signs, but clearly they have not alleviated the very serious humanitarian situation in Gaza. It could be said that Israel can and should do more, but when we ask why it does not do more, we come across the root cause of the Gazan humanitarian catastrophe. Hamas won in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, and emboldened by that, it militarily seized the Gaza strip in 2007. Since then, Hamas has been the undeniable root cause of the suffering and devastation in Gaza. It is committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, aided and abetted by its Iranian paymasters. It antagonises the situation by being a bad, unhelpful and corrupt Administration.

The reconstruction material that Israel sends through the Kerem Shalom humanitarian crossing is frequently misappropriated to build terror tunnels. In 2016, it emerged that $36 million had been diverted from the international relief group World Vision directly into Hamas’s coffers. Additionally, 369 Palestinians are alleged to have abused their medical permits to seek treatment in Israel, using them instead to plan and prepare terrorist atrocities. In such circumstances, given the rampant maladministration and deception that Hamas oversees, the Israeli and international aid efforts are amazing and optimistic. It is a credit to all involved that they continue to do the right thing, despite the real risk that their good intentions will be subverted for evil ends. Hamas is not just a corrupt administrator; it is a genuine threat to the security of Israel and the wider region.

3.18 pm  
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech.

Following the killings of Palestinians protesting on the “Great March of Return”, a senior UN official rightly described the humanitarian situation in Gaza as a “crisis on top of a catastrophe”. And it is a long-running catastrophe.

The illegal blockade of Gaza is entering its 12th year. That is more than a decade of occupying forces violently locking nearly 2 million people in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, in what David Cameron described as an “open-air prison”. It is more than a decade of Palestinians being terrorised by an Israeli
[Marsha De Cordova]

army that still effectively occupies Gaza, with Israel retaining control over Gaza’s borders, air space, sea space and public utilities. It is more than a decade of the Israeli army making frequent and devastating military interventions in Gaza, and it is more than a decade of its control being used to suffocate Gaza.

The poverty rate is 40%, with 80% of the population dependent on foreign assistance. Just 20 years ago, Gaza’s water network provided safe drinking water to 98% of households. Now the figure is less than 4%. Today there are just three to four hours of electricity a day in Gaza. In 2012 the UN warned that Gaza would be “unliveable” by 2020. That judgment was revised last summer: Gaza is already unliveable.

We could spend all day cataloguing the severity of the de-development of Gaza but throughout it must be remembered that the humanitarian catastrophe is human-made, perpetrated through military might and with international backing. Because it is human-made it can and must be unmade, but rather than seeking an international backing. Because it is human-made, perpetrated through military might and with international backing. Because it is human-made it can and must be unmade, but rather than seeking a political solution our Government facilitate the disaster. Just last year the Government approved more than £90 million worth of weapons exports to Gaza, including sniper rifles like those used to kill Palestinian protesters in recent months. Since we know that the Israeli army’s military arsenal is crucial in the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, will the Government review the sale of arms to Israel?

The human-made disaster in Gaza can be unmade. Palestinians and Israelis can live in equality and peace, and on just terms, but it will require political courage to bring that about. I look forward to that day and pray it will be soon, when we have a Government who are willing.

3.21 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Since Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated drastically. Hamas does not use international aid for the benefit of its citizens, to build schools or hospitals. Instead it uses it to build sophisticated tunnels into Israel, with the intention of committing terror attacks.

It has gone relatively unreported, and has certainly not been mentioned in this debate, that Israel has facilitated the passage of well over 10 million tonnes of construction materials into Gaza since Operation Protective Edge in 2014. It has expanded and developed its Kerem Shalom goods crossing to increase its capacity to 800 trucks a day, which carry food, medical equipment, fuel, building materials and more. Yet on at least three occasions in recent weeks Hamas has set fire to the crossing and to the gas pipelines that serve the people of Gaza. It has refused and destroyed aid supplies, including the medicines whose severe shortage other Members have highlighted, when it has been realised that they came from Israel. That attitude is completely incomprehensible and only compounds the suffering of Gazans, who are living in the most horrifying situation.

Israel regularly allows Gazan patients to get treatment in Israel, and helps Gazan doctors and nurses to receive further medical training at Israeli hospitals. When I visited Tel Aviv I saw Israeli doctors at Save a Child’s Heart providing life-saving heart surgery to Palestinian children and training Palestinian doctors, who will return to Gaza where they will be able to perform the surgery themselves.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend makes the point that Israeli hospitals treat citizens from Gaza. Is he aware that some of the people who have been treated have included senior Hamas operatives and members of their families, and their children?

Paul Masterton: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which is a good one. Senior officials in Hamas are always too ready to allow access to those high standards of healthcare in Israel, although they seek to block it for their own citizens.

The moments in that Tel Aviv hospital gave me hope that peace could be achieved, because Palestinians and Israelis worked together there as equals with mutual respect. When we debate the disastrous humanitarian situation in Gaza we cannot ignore the role of Hamas, as others have sought to do. What struck me when I was in the west bank and met the Palestinian chief negotiator was the fact that his overriding emotion was not frustration, anger or upset; instead there was a sense of despondency and guilt, because he keenly felt that the loss of the Gaza elections to Hamas in 2006, the battle of Gaza in 2007 and the political violence of 2009, when opponents of Hamas were tortured, shot and thrown off buildings, have created an insurmountable obstacle to peace and left the innocent people of Gaza at the mercy of an authoritarian militant jihadi regime.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Masterton: No, I am sorry but I do not have time.

It is important to note that the Palestinian Authority are not reconciled with Hamas. They cannot work with it or bring it to the table. They do not want Hamas to be in control of Gaza. They have sought to use financial measures to isolate it, and in the past couple of weeks President Abbas has really tried to increase pressure on the regime to transfer power over to Ramallah. Until Hamas renounces violence, seeks to work for peace and co-operates with the international community, the humanitarian situation in Gaza will only get worse.

3.24 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), on obtaining the debate, and associate myself with all his remarks. I also agree with every word that the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said.

I want to deal with a couple of issues that have not been mentioned in the debate. One concerns the truth. The debate is about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, not the politics of the region. We should remember that. It is about the men, women and children who live in an absolute hell hole. The media reporting this week of the visit by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge has been inaccurate. I welcome his visit—it is a good one—but the media have been referring to the Palestinian territories, and not the occupied Palestinian territories. We should never forget that point, and the BBC needs to do better.
Another thing that has not been touched on today is the issue of permits. To get access to hospitals in Israel, the west bank or East Jerusalem, people need a permit to leave Gaza. I visited the west bank last year and the number of people refused permits was enormous. With the recent increase in violence on the border, after the “Great March of Return”, children are being refused permits to seek medical attention in better equipped hospitals outside Gaza. By any parameter—by any civilised metrics—children should not be refused medical treatment. They are not a security risk or political operatives, but children. We should remember that.

We are talking about the enormous suffering of people who live in Gaza—an area that is beautiful, if only it can be given the resources to succeed. I feel strongly that British parliamentarians have a huge responsibility to shine a light on what is happening there. That is what we are doing today. The Government have a responsibility to step up to the mark and do something. We need to stand tall and act on what is happening, and not allow it to continue. I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say to call out that unacceptable situation, and what meaningful, purposeful suggestions he will make for what can be done to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

3.27 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate, and draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is most worrying. The people of Gaza live in difficult circumstances, with high unemployment, particularly among the young. There are no real export markets to speak of, and GDP is at low levels. The territory suffers from intermittent blackouts, and access to water is deteriorating. However, it is important to note that for many years Israel has provided electricity to the people of Gaza, and it was the Palestinian Authority who last year put pressure on Israel to reduce the electricity supply temporarily, when they refused to continue paying for it.

The only way to end the humanitarian crisis is to improve the prospects and life opportunities of the people of Gaza. Israel has an important role to play in that. I particularly welcome reports today that Israel and Cyprus are working together to build a sea port to facilitate Gaza’s rehabilitation, while also ensuring that Hamas will not be able to exploit the port for smuggling weapons. Hamas has, for too long, taken humanitarian aid away from the most needy in Gaza, for the purpose of terrorism. I hope that with the support of the international community the sea port will be able to open up a new and more hopeful chapter for the people of Gaza.

Sadly, today’s debate is set against rising tensions along the Gaza-Israel border. The Hamas-orchestrated riot on the border and the highest levels of rocket fire into Israel in years have been a painful reminder of the volatility of the area. Less well known, however, are the new arson terror attacks being deployed in Gaza, which have devastated Israeli communities along the border. Almost daily incendiary kites and balloons bearing inflammable materials and, occasionally, explosives have been launched from Gaza into Israel, causing more than 1,000 fires in Israeli communities.

Make no mistake: this new form of terrorism is led and co-ordinated by the Hamas terror group. It is inexpensive and straightforward. It must stop. The cycle of violence fundamentally highlights why Hamas must abide by the Quartet principles and immediately renounce violence against Israel.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, I inform Members that her speech will be the last three-minute speech. After that, the time limit will be two minutes.

3.30 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for initiating this debate.

It has been heartbreaking to follow the ongoing situation in Gaza. Time after time, we have had the opportunity to ease people’s suffering around the world, yet in Gaza we have failed to do so. We are witnessing ongoing massacres and conflict. In the past three months alone, 135 Palestinians have been killed and almost 8,000 people have required hospital treatment. That is the largest loss of life in Gaza since 2014. Violence was directed at protestors, many of them children. The massacre on the border on 14 May was triggered by the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem. On that tragic day alone, 52 Palestinians died. How, as an international community, can we allow our actions to lead to such a senseless loss of life? How can we welcome President Trump here next month, when his actions have led to the death of civilians and the slashing of funding for UN relief work for Palestinian refugees?

In my capacity as a humanitarian aid doctor, I worked with Palestinian refugees for three years, with the Red Cross and the humanitarian aid department of the European Commission. Through that work, I witnessed the aching and suffering of a marginalised population who have been repeatedly displaced, are without hope and are continually at the mercy of the international community. Gaza is suffering from a protracted health crisis, which is inhumane. To restrict access to healthcare for an already marginalised population is nothing short of disgraceful. Basic infrastructure such as healthcare, electricity and sanitation is not being developed in Gaza.

What makes Gazans less deserving than anyone else in the world who Britain, as an outward-looking country, fights for day in and day out? Why should parents continue to witness their children—children like ours—dying in their arms? We have a duty to ensure that we use the honourable power bestowed on us on the political stage to protect those at risk. Britain has always been an outward-looking country that does not shy away from the challenges that face us all. Our country’s response to this crisis goes to the essence of who we are as people. We must stand up and call out the human rights offences in Gaza when they are taking place. We have a duty. We cannot turn our backs on those in Gaza.

3.33 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate.
It is clear that the situation in Gaza represents a major humanitarian crisis, which is getting worse, not better, and which has dangerous consequences for the whole region. It makes the likelihood of a Palestinian state seem further away than ever.

Some 2 million souls are living in cramped urban conditions under a blockade by land, air and sea, as if they are in a prison. Some 1 million Palestinians are reliant on food aid. Just 10 years ago, that figure was 80,000. Ninety seven per cent. of households are without access to fresh running water. There are regular, frequent power blackouts. The reduced electricity supply puts strain on hospitals, as well as water and sanitation supply, with over 110,000 litres of raw waste or untreated water released into the Mediterranean sea every day. Six in 10 young people are unemployed. A Palestinian in Gaza is twice as likely to be unemployed as a Palestinian in the West Bank. That situation is simply unsustainable, so there is an immediate humanitarian need for aid.

Christine Jardine: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the US President’s slashing of UN aid to Gaza threatens to make the situation much worse? Will he join me in calling on the UK Government to put that case to the President when he is here on 13 July?

Mr Dhesi: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady and I hope the Minister will answer that point.

At the International Development Committee on 19 June, Rachel Evers, director of legal affairs at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, gave shocking evidence about the pressures on the relief on the ground. I ask the Minister to address the important point about the impact of cuts to the UNRWA budget. Can more be done by the UK in the short term to ease the humanitarian crisis? We all know that the long-term solution will be a political one, pursued by calm heads with a genuine desire for peace—alas, I do not see too many of those in Washington and Jerusalem at present.

We should absolutely condemn the US moving its embassy to Jerusalem as a provocative and reckless act. But what of the medium term? Here the answer may be economic as much as political. The Israeli Government must relax their blockade and allow economic development. People in Gaza must be allowed to develop their own infrastructure and economy. Finally, I ask the Minister to share his views on economic development as a route to a better future for the Palestinians in Gaza. In conclusion, Gaza is collapsing. Its people are suffering. The world is watching. We must act now.

I also remember the mothers showing me pictures of their children locked up in Israeli prisons after being sentenced—contrary to international law—by military courts. They could not visit their children, because the Israeli Government would not permit it. I also saw the fertile land and stunning beaches, but the land could not be fully exploited and the beaches were polluted because of the lack of sewage treatment. The potential for a vibrant nation was there, but people had little optimism that it could be achieved. It just gets worse.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I want to make a brief comment about children. A 10-year-old child in Gaza will already have lived through three conflicts, with no end in sight. Already, Save the Children is reporting that children are facing huge mental health problems, bed-wetting and all sorts of issues.

Alex Cunningham: Indeed, that is the case. I wanted to address mental health, but I do not have sufficient time. I thoroughly believe that it is the responsibility of Governments and countries around the world to help those unable to help themselves, yet countries trying to help the Palestinians are restricted by the harsh regime imposed on the movement of goods and aid by the Israeli Government.

It is not just about aid but about development and a nation that can sustain itself. I know it is an old cliche: give a man a fish and you have fed him for a day; teach him to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime. It is about allowing people to develop and reach their potential. Although that does not do the Palestinian fisherman any good, as they are banned from their own fishing waters. It cannot possibly be right to have two nations living cheek by jowl, with one firmly in the 21st century, developing and thriving, while the other is left behind in poverty and need.

We have seen how the nations of the world react in times of disaster. We have seen countries devastated by famine, others ruined by catastrophic weather and refugees fleeing war zones across the world. They all have one thing in common. Other countries can get access to those people. We cannot get access to the people of Palestine. It is time that the nations of this world made it clear that they are prepared to tell Israel that they want and will have access to these marginalised people. That is not just my message. I attended an Eid festival event at Stockton Mosque on Friday and heard a series of speeches, most from young Muslim women, about the middle east, particularly Palestine. They want a peaceful world. They want to reach their potential, but that is also their wish for the children of Gaza.
Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I call the first Front-Bench spokesperson, Joanna Cherry. I thank her for conceding some of her time to Back Benchers.

3.41 pm  
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate and on making such an eloquent and heartfelt speech. It is always a pleasure to listen to him.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of the shocking number and nature of the casualties sustained by Palestinians in Gaza due to recent events. In particular, he spoke about the fatality shooting of the volunteer paramedic, Razan al-Najjar, despite the fact that she was clearly identified as a paramedic. He said that that was a war crime, and I endorse that. He stressed the importance of an independent investigation of that death and of all the other deaths that took place, and the importance of people being held to account.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the nature of the weapons and the ammunition used, and made the demand, which many hon. Members agree with, that until those matters are looked into properly, arms sales to Israel should be suspended. He spoke about the humanitarian conditions on the ground, which was taken up very eloquently by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames).

Like me, and the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex supports a two-state solution, but recognises that that is becoming less likely because of the situation on the ground and the settlements in the occupied territories. In connection with that, I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. In October 2016, I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Human Appeal. It was sobering to see the size and nature of those settlements and the way in which they make the two-state solution unfeasible. I agree with his description of what is going on in Gaza as “collective punishment”, and he is also right that it is legally and morally wrong.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has long worked on these matters. He spoke about a briefing by Jamie McGoldrick last week that several hon. Members present attended. Mr McGoldrick described the situation in Gaza as polarised and visceral—a crisis on top of an unfolding disaster, as the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said. He said that there would be no humanitarian solution without a political solution. I asked what his key asks were, and he said that we had to address the United Nations Relief and Works Agency shortfall; shore up the health sector in Gaza; and support education so there can be a depolarised Government. Of course, Hamas must exercise restraint, but democratic Government should speak to democratic Government, and we must tell the Israeli Government to exercise restraint too.

Andy Slaughter: Mr McGoldrick also indicated not just that there had been a lack of restraint but that the weaponry used against civilians was designed to cause maximum injury. In contrast to some of the bizarre things that we have heard from Government Members, there was no attempt to treat the injured, so even minor wounds are causing amputations and infections. I also refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; I travelled to Palestine with Medical Aid for Palestinians last year.

Joanna Cherry: Mr McGoldrick made strong reference to the terrible injuries that have been sustained. He said that Gaza was running out of external fixators because there was no attempt to treat the injured, so even minor wounds are causing amputations and infections. I also refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; I travelled to Palestine with Medical Aid for Palestinians last year.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I had better make some progress, so that the Minister can respond.

Many issues have been raised today, and because of the lack of time, I will not go over them again in detail. The Minister is a good man, and he recognises the
gravity of the situation. I would like the United Kingdom Government to have a stronger voice on this issue. Earlier, the hon. Member for Battersea referred to what David Cameron said years ago about Gaza being an open prison. We need that sort of language to be made real.

Last month, the Israeli ambassador visited Scotland, and my colleague, the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop, met him. She delivered a forceful message on the Scottish Government’s behalf 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 there must be genuine work in good faith towards a peaceful two-state solution. The Scottish National party also supports the UN Secretary-General’s call for an independent investigation following the recent massacre.

The Scottish Government have spoken decisively, but they do not have the foreign affairs competence of the British Government. I want to hear what the Minister will do. Will he give us a cast-iron guarantee that the United Kingdom Government will not shirk their responsibility and that they will join others in the international community in speaking out clearly on this matter?

3.46 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It gives me great pleasure to follow the footsteps of distinguished hon. Members, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who has spent many years campaigning on this topic. I well remember when he played a vital role in securing a vote in the House of Commons to recognise the Palestinian state, but the UK Government still refuse to give that recognition. I am limited by time, and I want to give the Minister as much time as possible to answer all the questions that have been asked, but I will start by saying that, importantly, this is a different debate. It is about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. We want to know what the Government can do to alleviate some of that pain and suffering.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) spoke strongly, with great experience and passion, and as president of the Conservative Middle East Council, about how what has taken place in Gaza is legally and morally wrong. He was very plain with his words and I am grateful to him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned Jamie McGoldrick. We are all putting a lot of hope and faith into his role for the future of the conflict. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I travelled to the west bank together and had an emotional and educational visit. Many hon. Members have had similar trips. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) focused her contribution on the problems with the water and electricity supplies and the real humanitarian situation on the ground. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) talked about the permits. I saw at first hand how children who were leaving Gaza to try to get medical assistance in the west bank had to travel with family friends or others, because they had to leave the country with someone who was over a certain age, so they could not be assisted by their parents.

This debate comes at a vital time for the Palestinian people. It is no exaggeration to say that their whole future in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is now under direct threat. If we do not act in Britain, Europe, the United States or the middle east, or through the United Nations, millions will suffer from continued violence, from a lack of the most basic public services and clean water, and from a shortage of places to live.

The Trump Administration substantially cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. The EU has partially stepped up to the plate by announcing €3 million of new humanitarian aid to help civilians in Gaza in need of urgent assistance. In response, the UK decided to advance £28 million of agreed funding. Yesterday, the ad hoc committee for voluntary contributions to UNRWA met for the first time, and my reading is that the United Kingdom has donated a further £51 million, or £38.5 million. I welcome that contribution wholeheartedly. Will the Minister report back fully on yesterday’s meeting and what money will be targeted specifically at Gaza? We know that will be reliant on Israeli co-operation.

More than 120,000 people are still disconnected from public water networks, and 23% of Gaza is not connected to the sewerage system. Some 96% of the water from Gaza’s coastal aquifer is contaminated with nitrates and chlorides. Only a quarter of wells in Gaza meet World Health Organisation safety levels.

We are here today to offer advice to the British Government on what they can do economically, socially and politically to help the Palestinians in their hour of need. Last week, to mark the UN’s World Refugee Day, the leader of the Labour party visited two of the biggest Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. This week, Prince William is visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territories in an important symbolic act aimed at showing that people in Britain do care about the plight of the Palestinians. What is the Minister doing to argue for better access to Gaza so that the international community, non-governmental organisations, charities and politicians here can visit, so that the crimes perpetrated on Gaza are not hidden behind blockade walls?

We have to begin by acknowledging that the humanitarian crisis is man-made. It is vital to resolve Gaza’s catastrophic lack of clean water and electricity, as well as its health system, which is hanging by a thread, and other life-threatening problems that experts say will make the strip uninhabitable in a matter of years. The utter desperation rife in the squalid, bombarded settlements of Gaza has in recent weeks manifested itself in huge protests and an Israeli response that has shocked and appalled. As Members have said, we condemn any acts of terror by Hamas, just as we condemn the appalling actions of the Israeli Government.

Since the first protests on 30 March, the Israel Defence Forces have killed 135 Palestinians, including a young medic, 21-year-old Razan al-Najjar. Nearly 15,000 people have been injured, with 4,000 of those injuries caused by live ammunition. Sixteen children have been killed. Five Israelis have been injured. This puts further pressure on Gaza’s health system, which was anyway already on the brink of collapse, according to the World Health Organisation. I do not have the time to go into the
details of those outrageous, disproportionate and illegal acts, which have been covered many times in previous debates and today. Instead, I will use my time to pin down some of the humanitarian situation and what DFID can do to improve the lives of these people in the most dire of situations.

Protecting the Palestinians is an international obligation—let us be clear about that, too. In fact, it is the international community’s collective responsibility as states party to the fourth Geneva convention to provide protection to Palestinians in the occupied territories. The British Government should not be ordering their diplomats to vote against or abstain on resolutions that uphold international law.

I will move on to some questions that I hope the Minister will be able to answer. Currently the Government do not disaggregate their DFID spending for Gaza and that for the west bank. Will he consider reviewing that approach, so that our development work in Gaza, which is clearly a separate and defined area under blockade, can be more readily reviewed by this House? At present, the movement and access restrictions imposed by Israel significantly constrain the health system in Gaza. Access to treatment is impeded by the inability to import medical equipment, and administrative constraints are placed on people seeking medical attention outside Gaza. What progress has the Minister made in talks with the Israeli Government on expediting medical permits for those who require treatment outside Gaza?

The UK is supporting water and sanitation needs through £1.9 million-worth of support to UNICEF and £1.5 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross, helping support patients in 11 hospitals in Gaza. Will the Minister tell us more about those projects? Are those the only Gaza-specific aid contributions made by the UK Government to Gaza, outside obviously of their contributions to UNRWA, which supports 1.3 million people in Gaza? If I am allowed a crude calculation, if the population of Gaza is near enough 2 million, that money works out at just £1.70 a person in Gaza over one year. That funding finishes in September 2018. Will the Minister tell us when we will hear about future years’ funding?

In answer to written question 144778 in May, the Minister said he is reviewing how the UK can best support the health system in Gaza. What does that review involve and when will he report to the House? If elected, Labour will recognise the state of Palestine immediately. The Minister has been asked before why his Government do not recognise Palestine right now. If not now, when? He often talks with great empathy about the polarisation and worsening of the situation between Israel and Palestine. The reality of this Government’s actions is that they are providing very good critiques of the situation, but are failing to act robustly when they should be upholding international law. They should be taking action, not simply offering words.

On America, we often hear the Minister take a different line from that of US counterparts. That is of course welcome, but this Government must have the courage to tell President Trump that he is wrong. What is the Minister doing to work with other European and global partners so that all the UK’s eggs are not in the Trump basket and we are not reliant on the peace plan of Jared Kushner?

Finally, in his response to a House of Commons debate on 15 May on violence at the Gaza border, the Minister said:

“we are supportive of that independent, transparent investigation.”

[Official Report, 15 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 139.]

When the UN Human Rights Council resolved to set up a commission of inquiry to undertake precisely that investigation, the UK failed to join 29 partner countries and abstained in the vote. We are still waiting for an explanation of that decision.

3.55 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I begin by once again thanking the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate. His long-standing commitment to and passion for the Palestinian people is well known and appreciated by many. The conviction with which he speaks is noted.

There have been a number of powerful speeches on all sides. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) went through them, and I do not intend to add to that. It is impossible to pick out all the speeches, but I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). He spoke about his admiration for the state of Israel and his worry about where Israel policy has gone in relation to Gaza and the humanitarian concerns. I am sure he spoke for many in expressing not only the interest that the House has in the future security and existence of the state of Israel, but the worry, because of the humanitarian situation we have all described, about policy in terms of Gaza.

It is difficult to approach the issue in a new way, but I will say something towards the end about that, if I may. To begin, I would like to concentrate on the humanitarian issues. As so many Members have spoken and so much has been said, it is impossible to cover everything, so I hope colleagues will bear with me.

Last month, I visited Gaza again. I say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that we will do what we can to assist Members of Parliament in going, because there is nothing like seeing things on both sides, but it must be for Israel to decide in terms of security. We are all subject to caution about that. While I was there, I once again saw the extreme humanitarian difficulties that the people of Gaza now face. As Members have noted over the course of the debate, people there are living without enough fresh water, with only four hours of power a day, with some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world and, perhaps most important, with diminishing hope for their own or their children’s futures.

I will pick out a few key parts of the humanitarian system. Without additional support, the health system is unable to cope with the high casualty rates from the demonstrations. Between 30 March and 12 June, 14,605 people were injured and a further 135 died. Between 30 March and 3 June, two health workers were killed and 328 were injured, including by live ammunition and tear gas. An estimated 80,000 additional non-trauma patients have had limited access to emergency healthcare services. Shortages of medicines are chronic in Gaza. An estimated 1.2 million Gaza residents have no access to running water. A lack of adequate sanitation facilities poses a
serious health risk. Approximately 1.45 million people in the Gaza strip are at risk of contracting waterborne diseases from the consumption of unsafe water. Gaza has three main sources of electricity supply: Israel, Egypt and the Gaza power plant. The most stable of those sources is from Israel, which supplies 120 MW of electricity through 10 feeder lines, but those are unstable, as we know.

[Mark Pritchard in the Chair]

The food and nutrition situation remains difficult. An estimated 1.6 million people do not have reliable access to nutritious food in Gaza and are judged to be food-insecure. As I will say later, someone doing an objective assessment of whether the policies in relation to Gaza are working would come to the answer, “No”.

Before I come on to the politics, colleagues rightly want to know what we are trying to do. There are three key issues: first, the need to alleviate the urgent humanitarian need; secondly, the need to unlock the barriers to an improved quality of life for Gazans through economic development; and thirdly, the need to work with international partners to secure political agreements that will ease movement and access restrictions to Gaza.

The Department for International Development is stepping up its support to alleviate humanitarian need. When I was in Gaza I announced £1.5 million for the International Committee of the Red Cross appeal. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton asked for a little more information. That money will help 11 hospitals. I went to the al-Quds hospital in Gaza city, which was spotless. I met some of the doctors involved in treating patients there and some of the patients. Our work will help some of those 11 hospitals and their patients with the restocking of surgical equipment and medicines and with providing physical rehabilitation.

We are also committing an extra £2 million to UNICEF to address urgent water and sanitation needs. That will help Gazans to have access to clean water to drink, cook and bathe. Our support will provide more than 1,000 roof water tanks for families to help them to store scarce water, drinking water tanks, and chemicals to treat water in 280 wells and 38 desalination plants, making water safe for human use.

Colleagues have mentioned access. We value the role of the UN in co-ordinating humanitarian worker access and in supporting the safe reconstruction of Gaza. The UK is committed to an extension of support for the UN access and co-ordination unit, which works to ensure humanitarian access for UN and non-governmental organisation workers.

The UN Relief and Works Agency plays a vital role in providing basic services. We are, of course, concerned about the lack of finance for Gaza, particularly as a result of the United States’ decision to reconsider its financial commitment. UNRWA will struggle to survive unless we can find a way around this. Accordingly, I have announced £28.5 million, which I committed at the UNRWA pledging conference in Rome. Yesterday, at the UN Security Council, we pledged a further £10 million, making the £38.5 million that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned. That is money being brought forward to give to UNRWA now to help it to meet the shortfall. I hope that that is appropriate.

Dan Carden: Is that new money, or is it bringing money forward?

Alistair Burt: It is money brought forward, so of course we will have to consider what will happen in future years. However, the immediate need for UNRWA is money now, which is why we have done what we have done. The hon. Gentleman’s question is perfectly appropriate, and that is our answer.

That deals with the immediate term. On the slightly longer term, we are looking hard at what we can do on a new economic development package, designed to lift the standard of living in Gaza by increasing trade and job creation, enabling greater movement and access for people and goods, and enhancing the supply of electricity and clean water.

We are also looking at the proposals of Nikolai Mladenov, the UN special representative, that I mentioned the last time I spoke. They are being confirmed in the next month, but I anticipate that they will include measures to catalyse the Gazan economy and ameliorate the energy and water situation. We are very committed to supporting the special representative’s plans. That will deal more effectively with medium and long-term needs.

I will now move off the script, to the worry of my officials. In trying to find something new to say about a situation with which we are all familiar, I thought of this. As I said earlier, if someone looked objectively at Gaza, they would say—whatever party they were from—that whatever is being devised by way of policy just is not working. Israel has put pressure on Hamas for 12 years or so in order to effect political change in Gaza. It has clearly not worked. Hamas is still there. Rockets are still being fired. People on the border areas are still under threat, in Sderot and other such places.

Equally, Israel has not crumbled and is not at risk from Hamas. Hamas has achieved nothing politically and has damaged the people it purports to represent. The Palestinian Authority have had no success in dealing with Gaza. Attempts at reconciliation should be encouraged and should go forward. Those who live in Gaza have seen no evidence of the success of polices purportedly put forward in their defence, including politically, to give them a right to protest against the state of Israel. The same applies to protecting those in Israel from a terrorist organisation that is clearly hell-bent on killing them if it gets the chance.

I suspect it will come as little surprise if I tell colleagues that there is much truth in everything they have said. I do not agree with everything that has been said, but if hon. Members look at one another’s speeches, they will see that there is no great contradiction. Colleagues are talking about two sides of the same coin. It is true that Hamas was involved in exploiting—

Grahame Morris indicated dissent.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but this is the point. If colleagues only listen to their own side of the argument, we get—

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman should just listen for a moment. We get nowhere if we listen to only one side of the argument. It is no more effective to talk about Hamas’s rule in Gaza and blame everything on Hamas than it is to blame everything on
Israel and not understand the context of the political discussion and what is going on. My point is that none of that helps the people of Gaza. If that is what we want to do, we have to do something new.

I am saying very clearly that I do not think that the policies in relation to Gaza are working; I think they are failing. There is now greater recognition in the state of Israel that those policies are not working. A search on the internet for “Israel in talks with Hamas” will produce an article from 9 May this year titled, “Western country said to be brokering Israel-Hamas talks on long-term ceasefire”; an article from Haaretz on 6 June titled, “Israel Has to Talk to Hamas. Otherwise, It’s War”; and an article from 6 June, again from Haaretz, titled, “Israeli Army Believes Hamas Willing to Negotiate Deal”.

The only extraordinary thing in politics is that we assume that these two different sides will go on forever. This must not go on. The people of Gaza are not being served, and we would all be amazed by who talks to whom. The truth is that there has been a comprehensive, international and partisan failure for the people of Gaza, and this debate, like previous ones, has made it very clear. If the United Kingdom is to have an impact, we first have to say very clearly that these policies have not worked, and stress the urgent need for a political settlement and for immediate attention to be given to humanitarian aid in Gaza. We also have to be very clear that those who exploit the situation politically, whether it is non-state groups or state groups, also have to bear their responsibility. We get nowhere unless we understand that.

Now I will, of course, give the Floor to the hon. Member for Easington.

Grahame Morris: I simply wanted to say very briefly that it is not two sides of the same coin. We are dealing here with an asymmetrical situation where we have an oppressor and an oppressed. To present it as two sides of the same coin is wilful misrepresentation of the situation.

Alistair Burt: No, it is not. I entirely accept that it has an asymmetric element to it, with regard to Israel and Hamas, but that is a description. It gets us nowhere, because unless the two sides are engaged in finding an answer there will not be one. That is why it is interesting that people are starting to talk to people.

What worries me is that the PA, who for years have accepted the state of Israel, have been non-violent and co-operated in relation to security, must not be left out of ultimate settlement talks. It cannot all depend on Hamas and what it has been able to achieve over the years with its policy of destruction towards the state of Israel.

Colleagues have accurately described what is happening is Gaza, but my point is simply that, in trying to get something done, believing that only one side or the other has the answer is not, in my view and that of the United Kingdom Government, sufficient. We have to do more and call out everyone, saying, “Actually, the policy is failing, so everyone needs to provide something new.” Perhaps the settlement proposals from the envoys of the President of the United States may start that, but unless we each accept that there is some truth in what the other says, we will not get very far.

4.9 pm

Grahame Morris: I thank everyone who has participated in the debate from both sides. There has been great interest, with contributions and interventions. I thank the Minister for his response, and the Front-Bench representatives of the Scottish National party and my own party for their responses.

I urge the Minister to do all he can to seek to resolve the problem and bring relief to the people of Gaza. I say to Government Members: please do not mistake our empathy for the suffering of the people of Gaza with support for Hamas. It does not make us anti-Semitic or anti-Israel; it makes us human.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

4.10 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.
Fentanyl: Sentencing

4.35 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I beg to move, That this House has considered sentences for supplying fentanyl.

I am delighted to have secured this debate on the evils of fentanyl. It all came about because of a tragedy that took place one morning in 2016, when every parent’s worst nightmare came true for a family in my constituency. Graeme Fraser was getting ready to walk his dog. He went to ask his son if he wanted to join him. On entering his son’s bedroom, he found his son’s body on the bed, pale, rigid and lifeless. Robert Fraser was just 18 years old. Beside Robert’s body, on a book cover, was a clear plastic bag containing white powder. The police did not know what it was. Only several weeks later did tests identify it as a substance called fentanyl.

Robert was one of the first people in Britain to be killed by this dangerous and incredibly toxic drug. Since that day, at least 120 deaths in this country have been attributed to fentanyl, and since that day I have been working with Robert’s family to raise awareness, to try to save other young lives and prevent other parents going through what Michelle and Graeme have gone through. I am delighted that Michelle, Robert’s mother, is here in the public gallery today.

Ultimately, we are fighting for tougher jail terms for people who are caught supplying fentanyl. We are calling it Robert’s law, in memory of Robert, and I will explain why it is so incredibly important. Fentanyl is a class A drug, yet it is vastly more dangerous than any other substance in that category. Kent’s top drug detective told me that it was more like a poison. It is extremely powerful—50 times stronger than heroin.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that due to its intense potency, when fentanyl is cut with heroin and cocaine those drugs become far more addictive? Fentanyl is therefore ideal for drug dealers, because it is very addictive and their clients become very dependent.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. He is absolutely right. He is a true champion of his constituency, and he will recall that his own constituent, Jed Spooner, who was just 27 years old, died from fentanyl on 2 December 2017 in Clacton. It is an appalling drug and a real, evil poison, 50 times stronger than heroin. It is a synthetic opioid, often produced in China, smuggled out in shipping containers and sold domestically on the dark web. Over in America, fentanyl has claimed 20,000 lives.

Those numbers are remarkable, not because they are so large and rising so quickly but because our top police people at the National Crime Agency say they have seen no evidence that drug users are demanding fentanyl. It is not a drug that people are craving and demanding at all. Robert did not demand it. He was no drug addict. He would get together with friends at weekends and experiment; I would not recommend that young people do that, but we all know that they do, and what happened to Robert could happen to any of our kids.

Other fentanyl deaths have involved even greater deception. In the north-east of England, only last year, heroin suppliers began secretly mixing fentanyl with their usual supplies to increase profits, exactly as my hon. Friend pointed out. There has been a surge in overdoses in the region. In Teesside, at least six people have died. Again, the National Crime Agency said that it has seen no evidence of users demanding fentanyl-laced heroin.

Why do dealers get involved in it? The answer is simple: it is cheap and versatile. It is a great cutting agent, it is difficult to detect and it has extreme potency, which means that drug users believe they have consumed a pure, powerful and strong substance, yet for the supplier it is a fraction of the cost. For most drugs, supply is dictated by demand—people will always supply them because there is so much to gain from doing so—but fentanyl is not being demanded. It is a choice, which until now has been tipped one way by the desire for profit on the part of drug pushers and dealers, not by users seeking that toxic and dangerous substance. Given the lack of demand for fentanyl, its obvious dangers and its capacity to kill, dealers should be punished more harshly for supplying it. Today, they know that they will not be, which is why I am making the case for updating our justice system.

Some will argue that a whole new class should be created for fentanyl, but I do not think that would be the right thing to do. That would send the wrong message about other class A drugs, which are incredibly harmful. Michelle and I want the existing sentencing guidelines to be strengthened. Right now, they mention drugs such as cannabis, heroin and all the rest of it, but they do not mention fentanyl. The result is that we do not send a strong enough message to drug dealers. One recently convicted supplier was handed a jail term of just 18 months, despite the fact that his batch of fentanyl was directly linked to a death. That shows that the existing guidance is not strong enough. Until it is, drug dealers across our country will not be sent a strong enough message. They do not think our justice system will punish them fully for the level of misery they inflict.

Some people will say that tougher sentencing does not work. Again, I disagree. Let us look at gun control. Two decades ago, we introduced legislation to stop Britain heading down the American route of rampant gun ownership. Ten years later, the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 went even further and introduced still tougher sentences. Today, Britain has one of the lowest rates of gun homicide in the world. We have a history of looking across the Atlantic, taking note of alarming trends, and taking action to stop them gathering pace here. Over there, they know things are already very serious, and a number of states have started bringing in second-degree murder charges against fentanyl dealers. Let us do what we did with guns. Let us look at the fentanyl problems in America, look at the growing numbers here and take action now before it is too late.

I believe that a good start would be to place any quantity of fentanyl in the top of our sentencing categories of harm. After all, a quantity of fentanyl the size of a grain of sugar can be fatal. High or extreme potency should be added to the list of aggravating factors. Purity is already on the list. In terms of danger and capacity to kill, potency is far more significant than purity. The measure that I suggest would increase minimum jail terms from three years to six. After accounting for aggravating factors, most fentanyl suppliers would be
looking at a minimum of 10 years behind bars. That is the kind of strong message we want to send to dealers who think nothing of taking the lives of our kids.

I can see that there are arguments against this campaign. People will say, “The war on drugs is lost”—the usual defeatism. They will say, “We can never win the war on drugs. We can never stop drug addicts putting dangerous substances in their bodies. We can never stop dealers trying to make a buck off the back of them.” I say that the war on drugs is not lost. We must fight back. The number of drug deaths in Kent—the county of my constituency—has doubled in the past three years. In Canterbury, two young men recently lost their lives because of fentanyl.

Giles Watling: Last year, some 60 deaths were recorded, and that number has now doubled. In comparison with the number of deaths caused by the misuse of many other drugs, that is relatively small. Is it not right that we get on top of this now and nip it in the bud before it spreads even further?

Charlie Elphicke: I completely agree, which is why yesterday’s huge step forward on the road to Robert’s law is so welcome, with the Sentencing Council setting out new guidance called “Sentencing of drug offences involving newer and less common drugs”, which specifically related to synthetic opioids. I hope that the Minister will tell us more about the action being taken by the Ministry of Justice, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Sentencing Council. This is a trend that we must reverse. Drugs rain devastation on our families, friends and communities; they drag our young people into gangs and violent crime and they kill those closest to us.

I want to take the House back to the day that Robert died. His mother Michelle, who is sitting in the Public Gallery, was with a friend in Primark that morning when her phone rang. Graeme told her the news and she collapsed to the shop floor, screaming. Her life has not been the same since. I will finish with her words, because her situation could all too easily become anyone else’s in this room. She says:

“Robert was not an addict. He made a bad choice. This poison is costing lives and sitting back, hoping it will all go away is not an option. My son’s memory is worth so much more — and so is our children’s future. If we bring in Robert’s Law, we will save lives. And it means my son mattered. That can be my boy’s legacy.”

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) is able to take a few minutes in the time remaining to make a short speech about the campaign against this evil drug that he has been fighting alongside me for some years.

4.46 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. It is very good to support my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). I led a Westminster Hall debate on 22 November last year on the human and financial costs of drug addiction. The real trigger for that debate was the rise in fentanyl. My hon. Friend gave the figure of 20,000 deaths in the US, but the figures that I found suggest that to be more in the region of 50,000 to 60,000 in 2016. Fentanyl is becoming a real killer drug in the US. As we are very aware, it is a man-made opioid mimic. To put that figure into context, 60,000 deaths represents the entire rate of attrition and death of the entire 20 years of the Vietnam war, but that is happening each and every year in the US.

Ohio has had a particular problem, where deaths rose 33% in 2016 alone, with a death rate of 4,050. That is people across the whole social spectrum out of a population of 12 million in Ohio. To put that in relation to the size of the UK, that would represent 22,000 deaths. Thankfully, we are nowhere near that, at about 2,500 drug deaths in the UK.

My worry is that what starts in the US often crosses the Atlantic to us. I do not want to see what happened to Michelle and Robert happen again. Rehabilitation is important, because for every £1 that we invest in rehabilitation, £2.50 is saved. In that debate of 22 November, I called for fentanyl to become a category AA drug, with a higher sentence to go with it. Current sentencing guidelines are that 5 kg or more of a class A drug would bear a maximum of only 16 years in prison, whereas attempted murder, which is what supplying fentanyl actually is, carries up to 35 years. I am very pleased to support my hon. Friend and the family in every way that I can.

4.48 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), and my hon. Friends the Members for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), and for Clacton (Giles Watling), for their leadership on this issue.

Fentanyl is a very serious and pressing threat in three distinct ways. First, as the hon. Member for Dover pointed out, it has an unusual potency; it can be 50, 100 or, in some chemical forms, close to 10,000 times more powerful than heroin. A tiny fragment of this artificially produced drug can be far more powerful than heroin.

Secondly, there are the chemical effects of the drug. It is much more dangerous, gram for gram, than heroin because of its effects on the respiratory system. Artificial opioids bind themselves to receptors in the brain and have an effect on its ability to distinguish between its oxygen and carbon dioxide intakes. Confusing the receptors in the brain can lead to respiratory depressions, so that one effectively stops breathing.

The final reason why we need to be worried about the drug is that we can already see the scale of the problem it causes in the US, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet pointed out eloquently. In the UK, it represents a tragic element in a larger swathe of overdoses. It accounts for a few per cent. of the people dying from overdoses in the UK. In the US, fentanyl and other fentanyl-like substances account for nearly a third of such deaths, and the figure is climbing. As my hon. Friend pointed out, tens of thousands of deaths in the United States are taking place through fentanyl.

How do we deal with that? Here I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dover. His leadership and championing have led to two important changes in relation to the Crown Prosecution Service and the sentencing guidelines of the Sentencing Council—changes that I can honestly say would not have happened as rapidly had it not been for his work.
The first change made thanks to the hon. Gentleman’s championing is that the Crown Prosecution Service has specified that prosecutors dealing with cases involving fentanyl need to take into account the potency of the drug. They are encouraged to bring expert witnesses into the courtroom to explain how the drug operates, and that a tiny quantity can have the potency of a larger quantity of heroin or cocaine. The second, perhaps more important, thing that happened is that the Sentencing Council yesterday published its new guidelines. You will understand, Mr Pritchard, that it was absolutely no coincidence that that happened the day before the hon. Gentleman’s debate. The guidelines state:

“Since publication of the Drug Offences guideline, there has been an increase in the number of cases before the courts involving newer drugs, such as synthetic opioids”—in other words, fentanyl—

“which may have much higher potency and potential to cause harm than more common drugs. Where these newer drugs are covered by the guideline but not specifically listed in the section on assessment of harm, the approach to assessing harm in these cases should be as with all cases of controlled drugs not explicitly mentioned in the guidelines.”

This is the key point:

“Sentencers should expect to be provided with expert evidence to assist in determining the potency of the particular drug and in equating the quantity in the case with the quantities set out in the guidelines in terms of the harm caused.”

Then there is a box entitled “Example—supplying or offering to supply a controlled drug”, which says:

“If the quantity of the drug would cause as much harm as 5kg of heroin, the offence would be in the most serious category.”

Why is that important? Drug offences are listed by category, from 4 to 1. Category 4 would be 5 grams of heroin; the top category would be 5 kg. The guidelines will move expert witnesses to state that fentanyl is in the top category of class A drugs for prosecution. That will be vital in deterring people from supplying and importing the drug, but it is just the beginning of what will happen. The tragic death of Robert has led to a significant campaign, led by Roberts’ family and the hon. Gentleman, that has already changed the guidelines for the Crown Prosecution Service and the Sentencing Council.

That is just the beginning. The next stage needs to be a very serious public education campaign, so that we do more than just ensure strict guidelines against people supplying or importing this drug. Anyone thinking of using fentanyl should be aware of not only the danger to themselves, but the catastrophic damage that tiny quantities of the drug can cause to anyone in their home. In the United States, toddlers are being killed by this drug, because the tiny quantities, even on a small patch on the arm, can immediately choke and kill somebody as young as two. That needs to be apparent to the public. This debate in the House of Commons underscores that. I hope that what we have said in this debate will push that change through society.

I end by paying particular tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his extraordinary campaigning on the issue, which, as I said, brought about a change yesterday, driven entirely by this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Leaving the EU: Upland Farming

4.55 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of upland farming after the UK leaves the EU.

Dioch yn fawr iawn, Mr Pritchard. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to lead this debate. I thank both the farming unions in Wales, NFU Cymru and the Farmers’ Union of Wales, for their help in preparing for this debate and for their overall contribution to supporting the farming industry in Wales and the wider rural economy.

Wales does not have a national animal in the way that New Zealand has the kiwi, Australia the kangaroo, Argentina the puma and South Africa the springbok. We have the splendid mythical Welsh dragon, of course, but if we were to have a living animal, a very strong case could be made for the sheep, or perhaps the ram. There are more than 10 million sheep in Wales, based on the latest annual survey, accounting for 33% of all UK sheep. That compares with human population of around 3 million, accounting for only 5% of the UK population.

The reason for the huge number of sheep livestock in Wales is the terrain and climate of my country. Wales is very mountainous and, as we know, even more wet. Some 82% of Welsh land is utilised for agricultural—purposes—an incredible figure when considering Welsh terrain—and 10% of UK agricultural land is in Wales. Agriculture contributes 400% more to direct employment in Wales than it does in the UK on average, if my reading of the British Government’s Brexit economic impact assessments is correct. With those statistics in mind, Welsh politicians should be extremely concerned about the likely impact of Brexit on this vital indigenous Welsh industry. We have far more to lose from a botched Brexit than other parts of the British state do.

The vast majority of farming land in Wales is designated a less favoured area. It is more suited to pasture than to arable farming. As a consequence, the Welsh farming model tends to be the traditional family farm based on livestock, rather than the crop-based farming that we tend to see in England.

In the late winter of 2010, before I was elected, I visited Mr Ian Rickman and his family at their Gurnos farm to undertake some work experience. Gurnos is high above the village of Bethlehem in the Tywi valley, near the Garn Goch. The Garn is one of the largest iron-age forts on the Brecon Beacons mountain range. It houses the monument to the late Gwynfor Evans, a national great, and the first Plaid Cymru MP elected to Westminster. He used to walk its slopes to gain solace and inspiration.

When I did my work experience, it was bitterly cold. The reality is that the only productive use of land at such altitudes is for sheep farming. During that experience, I gained a huge amount of respect for the sheep as an animal, but also for the families who endeavour to make a living out of hill farming. I assure you, Mr Pritchard, that there are far easier ways to make money and sustain a family. Let us remember that according to Welsh Government statistics, the average farm income in Wales is less than £30,000 a year.
These people, however, are from the land. Their families have worked the hills for generations upon generations, and have sustained a community, a culture, a language and a way of living that has lasted thousands of years. They have cultivated a natural landscape so beautiful that in 2017 “Lonely Planet” designated the north of my country one of the essential places to visit in the world. As beautiful as the north is, I would of course say that Carmarthenshire is best, but the critical point I am endeavouring to make is that the beauty of our country, and everything that goes with it, is not just something that happens naturally. It is the result of the work of the agricultural community and its livestock. Without that, Wales would not be the special place that it is; nor would it have the impact that it has, economically and socially.

Had I more time, I would have elaborated on the economic and cultural importance of agriculture, and its benefits for tourism, other sectors of the Welsh economy, and the Welsh language. My good friend Councillor Cefin Campbell, who leads for the executive board of Carmarthenshire County Council on rural development, has identified working with the agricultural community and young farmers’ clubs as a key cog in his strategy for regenerating the economy and preserving the language in Wales.

I realise that other Members want to speak, and I am grateful for the support I received before the debate from those Members, so I will move on. Farmers are a tough bunch, used to operating in a climate of fluctuating incomes and rapid market changes for their produce. European agricultural support has been the one constant in keeping their businesses sustainable. The European market is by far the biggest external market for Welsh agricultural produce, especially lamb. I have to say to the Minister that there is a huge amount of anxiety and foreboding about the future. I have held many meetings with farmers and unions since the Brexit vote, and anxiety is increasing as we move on. If this debate achieves only one thing, I hope it is that we can collectively begin to reduce those anxieties in the agricultural community.

We have to concentrate on three main areas that are vital for the future of hill farming: devolution, agricultural support, and trade. If it is the ultimate decision of the British Government to leave key European frameworks such as the single market, new frameworks of the territories of the British state will have to be created in their place to govern internal trade. I am not opposed to the creation of such frameworks, if the British Government do decide to shoot the economy in the foot by leaving the single market. Following Welsh independence, I would want the Welsh economy to be within a larger trading bloc; cross-border economic co-operation is a very good thing.

The key divide between Plaid Cymru and our Unionist opponents is that we believe that any common framework should be built and regulated by the four Governments of the state in co-operation—in a partnership of equals. Any decisions should be made on a shared governance basis, by a properly constituted UK council of Ministers, with a robust decision-making and dispute resolution process. They, on the other hand, believe that these matters should be decided in Westminster, and Westminster alone. That risks Wales becoming a permanent rule taker—or, as the Foreign Secretary might say, a vassal country within the British state. That risks English-specific frameworks being imposed on Wales, to the detriment of hill farmers in my country.

Admittedly, our position in Wales has not been strengthened by the contemptible capitulation of our country’s Labour Government, who accepted the changes. As Professor Tim Lang said recently in an evidence session of the External Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, when it comes to Brexit, Welsh interests are now “steamrolled”. As I said during a ministerial statement last week, the actions of the Welsh Government will go down as one of the biggest sell-outs in Welsh political history, and I can assure you, Mr Pritchard, that that is quite some achievement.

The 26 policy powers re-reserved by Westminster include vital agriculture-related policy areas such as agricultural support, fertiliser regulation, genetically modified organism cultivation, organic farming, zootech, animal health, animal welfare, food and feed safety, food labelling, public procurement, nutrition labelling, plant health and food geographical indicators. Welsh lamb holds EU-protected geographical indication status, of course, as does Welsh beef.

Liz Saville Roberts: (Dyflyr Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank my hon. Friend—diolch yn fawr iawn. Would he agree that it is time for the red meat levy—on animals that were reared in Wales but slaughtered in England—to come back to Wales, so that Hybu Cig Cymru can do an effective job on marketing that meat?

5.4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.14 pm

On resuming—

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It has been a bone of contention for the Welsh farming community for far too long that when products go over the border to be slaughtered, the levy is collected in England and not returned to us for the proportion of our products.

Welsh meat has an EU protected geographical indication, which is a mark of its quality and a vital marketing tool. Indeed, Hybu Cig Cymru considers the PGI to be of enormous economic importance to the Welsh red meat industry as it identifies the origin and unique qualities of our lamb and beef. Hybu Cig Cymru estimates that 25% of the growth in Welsh lamb exports between 2003 and 2012 can be directly attributed to its PGI status.

The Welsh Labour Government have effectively handed control of the issue to Westminster, despite the warnings of farming representatives. Of course, that is a Westminster Government who insist that only the Union Jack can appear on our driving licences, despite honourable exceptions in Wales who insist on having the Welsh dragon on them.

Concerns are not limited to Wales. The chair of Food Standards Scotland, Ross Finnie, expressed his concern in a letter to the Scottish Parliament. On the power grab, he said:

“However, if those matters are reserved to the UK Government to determine, it will be difficult for Scottish stakeholders’ voices to be heard, or for the needs of businesses or consumers in Scotland to be given priority.”
Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, for giving way. He mentioned the UK market framework, which most of the farmers in my constituency are pleased about. He also mentioned the Welsh Labour Government. The fear of farmers in my constituency is about that Government being in charge of farming—thank goodness that Westminster will be leading the way.

Jonathan Edwards: I fear the hon. Gentleman is continually getting mixed up. Nobody opposes the creation of common frameworks should we decide to leave the EU internal market. The key question is where power over those frameworks resides. Our approach is that this is a multi-polar state, so the four Governments of the UK should have a joint say. His approach, confirmed today, is that such matters should be determined only in Westminster. A serious political divide separates us, and the people of Wales can cast their view on that at the next election.

The second major issue is agricultural support. Since the formation of the common agricultural policy, hill farmers have received direct support, which constitutes a significant element of farm incomes. In Wales, 80% of total farming income comes from CAP, and Wales, which has 5% of the UK population, gets 9.8% of CAP spend in the UK, which equates to nearly £300 million a year. CAP is a key part of the EU’s seven-year multiannual financial framework, which gives great certainty in support at a time when market prices for produce are volatile.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the Government’s announcement that they will guarantee CAP payments until 2022? Since he mentioned Scotland, will he back the National Farmers Union Scotland, which supports the Government’s approach to have common frameworks but to allow the devolution of currently devolved agriculture matters to Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Jonathan Edwards: I am afraid that the situation in Wales is not as good as for English farmers, who have certainty until 2022. I am not aware of the situation in Scotland, because I am a Welsh Member of Parliament. I am sure the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) will accept that. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) may address those issues.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. If Members want to make a contribution, they can intervene or speak. I ask those who intervene to be mindful that this is a very popular debate. I will impose a time limit once Mr Edwards ends his speech, and that is likely to be shorter if people keep intervening. I do not want to stop debate, but I am mindful of other colleagues in the Chamber.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Pritchard. I will return to the issue at hand, Welsh farming.

In Wales, the situation has been compounded by the decision of the Labour Government of my country to reduce direct payments to producers by 15% by moving money from pillar 1. However, the point remains that CAP payments offer a degree of stability. While previously, under CAP, farmers did not have to worry overtly about the impact of Westminster elections on the amount of agricultural support they would receive, they could easily now face a situation in which a new Westminster Government could radically alter agricultural support policy. As we see from the power grab, the Labour Government of my country have abdicated all responsibility.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburg and Selkirk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Edwards: I will not give way. I will carry on, mindful of what the Chairman has said. While the British Government have promised to protect the current UK level of EU payments until 2022, the reality is that once we have left the EU, agricultural support will become an annual issue for the budget, or at the very best a three-year cycle under a future comprehensive spending review. There is no guarantee that current levels of funding for Wales will continue after March 2019.

We urgently need clarity for Welsh hill farmers, particularly about what the budget for agricultural support will be and how exactly it will be administered. Now that agricultural support has been re-reserved, I would be grateful if the Minister could outline how it will work for Welsh hill farmers. Will the Welsh share of agricultural support be based on our agricultural footprint, or do the British Government intend to distribute funds for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland based on Barnett consequentials?

During the referendum, the leave campaign argued that farmers would receive a dividend post-Brexit, because the UK would no longer have to make contributions to the EU budget. However, the reality is that there will be less money for Government investment post-Brexit, because the economy will slow and revenues will subsequently be less. Agriculture could find itself way down a long list of priorities for Westminster. Will the Minister outline what intergovernmental discussions have been held between the UK and the devolved Governments, and where exactly we are on getting clarity on the vital issue of agricultural support?

The third major issue is access to export markets. The European Union is a vital market for Welsh meat. Hill farmers inform me that approximately half of all their lambs are exported to the EU on a frictionless, zero-tariff basis, and 90% of all Welsh meat exports are destined for the EU. The EU is the largest global market for agricultural produce, and while the rest of the world is doing everything possible to get access to that market, the British Government are moving in the opposite direction. Preserving those markets is vital. It is sobering that some of the highest new tariffs are agricultural. The lowest that tariffs on lamb can be under WTO rules is 40%, and they are far higher if the product is frozen or processed in any way.

Admittedly, a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU could solve the problem, but while the British Government continue to maintain that no deal is an option, those of us who have concerns about the British Government’s negotiating strategy cannot be accused of scaremongering. We only have to look back to the chaos caused by foot and mouth. There was a collapse in market prices, a collapse in farm incomes and a host of other problems, all because farmers could not export to the EU. Impacts on upland farms were particularly acute. While such circumstances occurred due to a ban...
on exports rather than trade barriers, such impacts are worth bearing in mind when we consider the potential impacts of harder Brexit scenarios.

Now is the time to commit to maintaining tariff-free access to the UK's largest trading bloc through our membership of the EU single market and customs union. That would ensure that our food producers could continue to export tariff free, that there would be no other barriers to trade and that already established, complex supply chains were not disrupted. The Farmers Union of Wales agrees. The president of the union, Glyn Roberts, said:

“Since the Referendum we have maintained that we should remain within the Single Market and Customs Union, and every day that passes brings more evidence supporting our view that at least in the short term, leaving these institutions would be a grave mistake.”

Our farmers are proud of the standard of their produce. They have some of the highest environmental and welfare standards in the world. If the British Government insist on dragging us out of the EU single market and customs union and pursuing free trade deals with third countries, it is vital that those standards are not compromised in any way, and that our markets are not opened up to substandard produce. It is essential that such matters are not regarded as exclusively within the remit of the UK Government and Parliament. As Hybu Cig Cymru chairman Kevin Roberts has said, “Any future trade deal must take full account of the needs of the Welsh red meat sector.”

Ultimately, any future trade deal must be fully endorsed by the National Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

To close, agriculture, due to its complex supply chains and its prevalence in Welsh culture, is the backbone of the rural economy. It is vital, therefore, that the UK and Welsh Governments should do all they can to ensure its sustainability and success into the future. As the director of NFU Cymru, John Mercer, told me, “Farmers were promised a bright and prosperous future after Brexit and it is now imperative that those political promises are upheld.”

Welsh hill farmers potentially face a perfect storm of hindered access to their main export markets and the opening up of the UK domestic food market to lower standard food produce. Policy makers cannot afford to get it wrong. With the clock ticking, it is time for Ministers to start coming up with some answers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I thank the attendants and technical team for their help in resolving a problem with some of the microphones earlier.

Given the popularity of the debate, I reluctantly have to impose a time limit of four minutes. That, of course, excludes the Front Benchers, who have five minutes, apart from the shadow Minister and the Minister, who have 10.

5.25 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing the debate. My interest in upland farming lies with Exmoor, and I am incredibly proud that about one third of the national park is in my constituency. For the record, the other two thirds are in the constituency of my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger).

Farming is an incredibly important part of the county’s economy generating 13% of Devon's GDP, by some measures. As well as producing food, upland farming adds value to rural economies in many ways through diversification. The retail, recreational and tourism industries are especially important. I am proud that many of the upland farmers in Exmoor are embracing that diversification, and proud of the work that they do to protect and enhance the unique upland landscape. However, I want to focus on the primary industry, if I may put it that way, of farming.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree, furthermore, that diversification of the final product of upland farming, such as quality land and products, can enhance its economic future, particularly because of the image of an unspoiled environment, wind and rain and so on?

Peter Heaton-Jones: Yes, that is absolutely right. There are about 70 million day visits a year to national parks in this country, because of the landscape. Quite apart from the farming that goes on there, stewardship by upland farmers contributes to the fact that so many people want to visit those areas.

The uplands are home to about 44% of England’s breeding ewes and 40% of its beef cows. I saw a small sample of what I am talking about on a recent visit to West Ilkerton farm at Barbrook, near Lynton on Exmoor. It is a family-run livestock farm whose farmers have not only embraced diversification and run a successful business in challenging areas, but are leading members of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network, which, along with the Exmoor National Park Authority, has been instrumental in producing a detailed document, “Exmoor’s Ambition”, seeking to engage the Government in discussions of how upland farming might be supported post-Brexit.

There is clearly considerable uncertainty for upland farmers now, and it is right that they should play their part in shaping future policy, so I am delighted that the Government are listening. I know they are, because three weeks ago the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was kind enough to make two visits over two days to Exmoor farms in my constituency, in which he took full account of what the document says about realising Exmoor’s ambition. The national park authority and the Exmoor Hill Farming Network have an idea for a pilot for a new approach, to be used after Brexit, to secure and enhance the many public benefits that rural landscapes and their farming businesses give their local economies.

“Exmoor’s Ambition” is about a simpler, more integrated and locally accountable policy that incentivises all the public benefits provided by the countryside. It would be delivered through a single scheme that has the concept of natural capital at its heart and is driven by results and evidence about what actually works. There are no better people to talk to about that than the upland farmers who have worked that landscape for many years.

The proposed scheme consists of two complementary measures: “good farming”, available to qualifying land-managing businesses, and “enhanced benefits”, which target specific outcomes. Importantly, those measures
would be matched by the branding and promotion of goods to secure a premium income for their producers and the local economy. The post-Brexit outcomes that this programme seeks to achieve include tackling climate change, protecting the historical environment of the uplands, restoring damaged landscapes, rejuvenating hedgerows, improving river quality, enhancing public recreation, promoting local products and reducing flooding, which is incredibly important on Exmoor.

In the very limited time left to me, let me say this. These are uncertain times, as we approach Brexit. For upland farmers, such as those on Exmoor, the uncertainty is exacerbated by the inherent challenges to farming in that difficult landscape. I know that the Government are alive to those issues, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the support that upland agricultural communities, such as those on Exmoor, will have as the Brexit process moves forward.

5.30 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this very important debate.

My constituency includes Teesdale, which is part of the north Pennines area of outstanding natural beauty. I represent 400 sheep farmers, most of whom are on the uplands. Teesdale is a unique natural environment. A couple of months ago, I got up at 4.30 am to see the black grouse lekking, and we had a tour of the area to see the fantastic bird life. There were lapwing, curlew, snipe, oyster catchers and partridges. There were also mad March hares boxing. The biodiversity is absolutely spectacular, but it is fragile. If we do not get a good post-Brexit solution for the farming community, those species could collapse in 20 years. If they do, we will not be able to bring them back.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I must visit the lovely place that the hon. Lady is describing. Does she agree that some of the attributes she mentioned are down to the passion the hon. Lady is describing. Does she agree that some of the attributes she mentioned are down to the passion that I think is fair to say that my constituency is based on agriculture. It is a hill farm constituency that measures 85 miles by 45 miles, and upland hill farms are predominant throughout. Agriculture is the backbone of the constituency, but in GDP terms tourism is now in front of it. However, our tourism industry exists only because of the agriculture industry, and people forget that the two are intertwined, as are many other industries. The upland hill farmers support our vets, garages, shops and so on, so when we talk about upland farms we are also talking about communities.

Farmers in my constituency have many concerns, one of their main ones being—I have already touched on this—that the Welsh Government will take the lead on agriculture outside of a UK-wide framework. We need only consider the lack of a response to bovine tuberculosis in Wales. Only on Sunday I visited a farm that, sadly, after three generations of farming beef, has had to sell all its cattle. They went clear weeks before and have now, sadly, stopped beef farming.

Quarantine units at local shows are another issue. DEFRA has not introduced them in England, but they have been introduced in Wales. Local shows are the lifeblood of communities, yet those communities are being penalised. It is tragic, so thank goodness that Westminster will take—we hope—a sensible lead on that.

Three weeks ago the Secretary of State visited the beautiful valley near Painscastle in my constituency. As we came over one of the open common hills, I told him a flood of cheap lamb imports from New Zealand and Australia. It is DEFRA’s responsibility to make it clear that that is a red line.

If we lose our domestic market and do not have our European markets, we will not be able to secure the environmental benefits we want, because farming must be sustainable as a business. One of my constituents has written to me to point out that other World Trade Organisation members have already made a formal complaint about the proposed EU-UK split on agricultural import quotas, so it will be interesting to hear what the Minister has in mind on that.

The second important thing is the support mechanisms, because we obviously do not want to see a cliff edge. A switch to public goods is fine in theory, but it will be fine in practice only if the amount of money paid is sufficient to keep farmers in business. I have already pointed out that people are on low incomes that they cannot afford to see cut; they need to see their incomes rise.

I am worried by the proposed cap on payments to individuals, which is aimed at the landed aristocracy. The only way that Ministers can avoid it is if they start paying tenant farmers directly without—this brings me to my third point—increasing Rural Payments Agency bureaucracy, which is a long-standing problem of which the Department is well aware. Obviously, we do not have a lot of scope for deregulation in the farming community, on animal identification and so forth, because we have to maintain our access to the European market.

5.35 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), for proposing the debate.

I think it is fair to say that my constituency is based on agriculture. It is a hill farm constituency that measures 85 miles by 45 miles, and upland hill farms are predominant throughout. Agriculture is the backbone of the constituency, but in GDP terms tourism is now in front of it. However, our tourism industry exists only because of the agriculture industry, and people forget that the two are intertwined, as are many other industries. The upland hill farmers support our vets, garages, shops and so on, so when we talk about upland farms we are also talking about communities.

Farmers in my constituency have many concerns, one of their main ones being—I have already touched on this—that the Welsh Government will take the lead on agriculture outside of a UK-wide framework. We need only consider the lack of a response to bovine tuberculosis in Wales. Only on Sunday I visited a farm that, sadly, after three generations of farming beef, has had to sell all its cattle. They went clear weeks before and have now, sadly, stopped beef farming.

Quarantine units at local shows are another issue. DEFRA has not introduced them in England, but they have been introduced in Wales. Local shows are the lifeblood of communities, yet those communities are being penalised. It is tragic, so thank goodness that Westminster will take—we hope—a sensible lead on that.

Three weeks ago the Secretary of State visited the beautiful valley near Painscastle in my constituency. As we came over one of the open common hills, I told him
to look down the valley: it was not designed by an environmentalist based in a London or Cardiff office just two or 20 years ago. That valley is so beautiful because it was designed by farmers over the past 100, 200 and 300 years. Farmers are the best people to run our environment and they should be supported to do that.

I am delighted to say that the Secretary of State made it clear—as I am sure will the Minister again today—that environmental payments, or public payments for public goods, will continue under the “Health and Harmony” consultation. That consultation covers England, but we must not forget that Cardiff Bay has produced nothing to address looking after farmers or to consult them on their future in a post-Brexit world.

The Secretary of State spoke to many senior farmers in a barn from which he could not escape. He gave a very informative talk and answered all their questions on their concerns about the future. Even more importantly, after that visit I took him up the road to Rhosgoch—another village, next to Painscastle—where he met 40 representatives of local young farmers’ clubs, whose futures depend on a post-Brexit agricultural world. My goodness, if hon. Members had seen and heard the positivity in that room, they would not be concerned about a post-Brexit agricultural world.

Ladies and gentlemen—[Interruption.] I am sorry, I meant to say “hon. Members”. I was on the stump there—I’ll sell something in a minute! We constantly hear negativity from politicians, academics and the press, but what we are hearing from the agricultural world, including the young agricultural world, is positivity, because of what the Westminster Government are doing and our future in a post-Brexit world. Europe sells more to us than we sell to it, and this country’s farmers have a very positive future.

5.39 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Ryw’n llonygfarch fy Nghylch y Arlunyydd yr Aelod dros Dwyrain Caerfyrddin a Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) ar sicrhau y ddadl hon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr on securing this debate. Dwyfor Meirionnydd is eurry—mountainous and magnificent to the eye. It has been a man-made landscape for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Livestock husbandry made much of the environment, and taking farmers and families out will unmake it.

Earlier this year, I held a series of events with agricultural societies and farmers unions, which included visits to upland farms in the Trawsfynydd, Abergeirw and Cwm Prysor communities of Meirionnydd. Time and again, I heard anxiety for the future and a real fear that the voices of upland farming and upland communities would be lost in the Brexit lobbying cacophony.

Geraint Davies—Geraint Fedw Arian Ucha’f of Rhydachaf—is the chair of the Farmers’ Union of Wales in Meirionnydd. He has a lot to say about Brexit, but I will keep it simple. He tells me that in Wales, we need evidence of a long-term vision for rural communities as a whole, a sense that those communities matter, and an appreciation of their dependency on the rural economy.

The single farm payment is spent in local shops and stores. Rural development programme money keeps local contractors in business. There is an interconnectivity to the agricultural economy that is as far-reaching and vulnerable to change as any environmental habitat.

Much is made of the payment for delivery of public goods. Farmers do not need to hear that that is a good thing—most agree—or that a way will be found to conform to World Trade Organisation requirements. They truly need to know not just whether but how a 100% level of public payments for public goods will work. I beg the Minister to respond to that. How will it conform with the WTO regulations?

In the same breath, if agriculture payments are to be used as environmental tools to deliver environmental benefits, we need clarity on the role of grazing livestock and how to manage grasslands to maintain habitats while symbiotically producing meat that inherently meets high-quality welfare standards.

John Lamont: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Many of the issues in my constituency that involve the farming community are exactly the same. In terms of the overall principles of future farming support, does she want a system that simply replicates the current common agricultural policy, that promotes efficient and productive farming, or that focuses on the marginal farms in our country, which I suspect we both have in our constituency? It is important to understand the driving force that she sees as being behind the future CAP.

Liz Saville Roberts: To speak frankly, I would like to see a system that does not result in the upland clearances of farmers. Farmers and their contribution are important to the wildlife, and we should consider the people and their role.

On the significance of grazing, it is important to have an awareness of the impact of under-grazing and over-grazing, local knowledge and the implicit co-operation of the Government, environmental officers and agriculturalists. It goes without saying that such awareness cannot be centrally managed from Westminster; it must be devolved.

Farmers in my constituency are being told to diversify and that they need to look at the sort of animals they produce. Surely, however, we need to acknowledge that only native mountain breeds are suitable for upland environments. It is simply not an option to diversify by crossing with lowland breeds, because large-carcase sheep simply cannot survive the winter, let alone fare well in such environments. At the same time, the small breeds that will flourish in mountain environments have their markets in Europe, and we are yet to find another market for them.

I take this opportunity to call on farmers to speak to each other and to speak out. The Brexit debate has been, and remains, toxic. People have been driven to one side or the other. Frankly, by now, it does not matter how someone voted in the referendum, but what happens now does matter. It is fast becoming clear that individual businesses and communities as a whole are at risk. Wales was sold Brexit on the back of unsubstantiated soundbites. Now is the time to come up with the substance of these promises or to come clean and admit that the risk to Welsh communities is a price Westminster is willing for us to pay.

5.44 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). Hill farming is...
of colossal importance to the United Kingdom. It brings the public benefits of biodiversity and flood prevention, and economic benefits. In my constituency we have the Lake District national park, the Yorkshire Dales national park and South Lakeland, and the Lake District became a world heritage site just 12 months ago. The tourism economy of Cumbria is worth £3 billion a year and 60,000 jobs, all underpinned, as other hon. Members have said, by the work of our farmers to protect and maintain that landscape.

Why are most of our hill farmers involved in hill farming? It is about food production. Some 45% of UK lamb is produced in the uplands, 55% of the UK suckler herd is located in the uplands, and 35% of UK milk is produced in the uplands. Of course, straw and feed grown in the lowlands goes to feed animals in the uplands, so without hill farming, lowland farming would soon go. That should concern and bother us all.

We are often rightly concerned about fuel security, but we think too little about food security. Some 45% of the food we consume today is imported. Twenty years ago, that figure was more like 35%. It is a very worrying trend. The future of hill farming is vital. Providing a future for our uplands must be at the heart of the Government’s plan in the agriculture Bill that we look forward to in a few weeks’ time.

The ring-fencing and protecting post Brexit of the common agricultural policy budget of £3.8 billion until 2022 is important. I have heard some Government Members talk about that as a long-term commitment, but anyone who thinks four years in farming is long term understands nothing about farming. It does need to be a long-term commitment, and there needs to be a growing, not fixed, budget. The Government must take immediate action on existing payments.

Many hill farmers are coming to the end of their high-level stewardship and entry-level stewardship agreements. A friend of mine, a farmer in the Westmorland part of the Yorkshire dales, comes to the end of his HLS agreement in January 2019. He is not allowed to start an application or have a start date for a countryside stewardship scheme until January 2020, so he has to live for 12 months without a scheme of that kind. Even then, mid-tier countryside stewardship schemes offer little value, and higher tier schemes are frankly unathomable and incredibly difficult to get through. Many farmers simply do not bother with them. Will the Minister ensure the continuation for hill farmers of HLS and ELS agreements until a new, better and bespoke scheme for the uplands can be introduced? I also suggest that the new scheme has monthly start dates, to ease the workload for the RPA and Natural England.

It looks like the one thing we are sure of in the agriculture Bill is that basic payments will not be part of it. Over the last 40-odd years, we have subsidised food in this country and we have never had a debate about whether we thought that was a good idea, but we can be certain that we will feel it when we stop subsidising food. We can welcome public goods being funded, but we should all take a step back and consider what that might mean for the upland farmer. If we over-commodify every single thing that they do, will we not be in a situation where we see the price of everything and the value of nothing?
for farmers. Farmers have a 10-year plan, a 20-year plan and a 30-year plan, not a four-year one. We need to know what is happening in the long term. The level of support is high in the last common agricultural policy reform package. That must continue if we are to allow our farming sector to thrive.

In Northern Ireland we are dependent on the less favoured areas for our sheep in particular and, to a lesser degree, cattle. That is very important to us in Northern Ireland, where we have a large agri-food sector and depend on exports. The sheep industry has the potential to do more, and that must be encouraged post-Brexit. I have every faith that the Department will continue to support the industry. I will work with the Department as it continues to facilitate the work of sheep farmers, as well as so many other farming industries that are reliant on subsidies to farm what we rely on so much in Northern Ireland and throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.

I fully support the case put forward by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr and by other hon. Members who have spoken. I look forward to the Minister outlining how his Department will fully support our sheep farmers throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

5.52 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this important debate. We are in the agricultural show season, when the public directly interface with our wonderful rural life and environment. I had the great pleasure of being at the Royal Highland show last week. I know the Secretary of State was there. I am not sure whether the Minister was there; he can let us know when he speaks.

We saw the great interest in agricultural issues, and it was great for the Scottish Affairs Committee to come face to face with so many of our agricultural producers, growers and farmers at a roundtable.

Upland farmers are the backbone of the rural economy. Without their work, upland and highland constituencies such as mine would simply be abandoned. The value of hill farming and crofting cannot be measured by kilos of beef or lamb alone; they make a hugely significant contribution to thriving communities and flourishing environments. That contribution can be difficult to quantify. It is all about the maintenance of our upland environment, with all its iconic wildlife and landscapes. As we have heard, it is about the preservation of the social fabric in our more remote rural areas, and it is the cornerstone of both the local and national economies. But it is all in the margins, socially and, in particular, financially.

Without financial support payments, farming could simply disappear from large parts of Scotland. Less favoured areas make up 85% of farmland in Scotland, compared with 17% of farmland in England—and we make up more than a third of the landmass of the United Kingdom, so that is an awful lot of land. We are therefore a sector that is more dependent on support. Without it, so many places in Scotland would return to scrubland and weeds. That is now a real risk. Brexit uncertainty threatens to undermine confidence among all those involved in traditional hill farming. We need a post-Brexit package of co-ordinated policy measures to secure the long-term viability of hill and upland farming and crofting businesses.

The UK Government’s clueless Brexit has caused serious uncertainty about the economic viability of Scotland’s agricultural sector, given how valuable the EU is to the industry. Subsidy payments are immensely important to Scotland and account for about two thirds of total net farm income. Between 2014 and 2020, Scotland will receive €4.6 billion from the EU, which is equivalent to about £500 million per annum, representing 16.5% of the UK’s common agricultural policy allocation.

We do not know what will happen when things change. We have heard about plans for subsidies to somehow follow environmental improvements, or this vague suggestion of success. What we do know is that in 2022, payments as we currently understand them will come to a halt, and sectors such as upland farming will be disproportionately hit. We also have no idea how the devolved Administrations will be funded. We have heard talk of per capita payments, or payments subject to the Barnett formula, but we have crunched the figures: the better outcome of the two would be the Barnett formula, but Scotland would still lose some £2 billion of CAP funding that would need to be replaced. That is because of Scotland’s higher concentration of farmers and crofters.

We have no clue what the Government’s plans are, post 2022. Hopefully that will become more apparent in the agriculture Bill.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, we cannot wait. The Scottish Government have put in place a plan that will offset the worst of the chaotic cluelessness that underpins the UK Government’s approach to Brexit. We want to keep support in place beyond 2022, and the Scottish Government have announced a deal for Scottish farmers that would give them some sort of security until 2024. That five-year transition period would give a two-year period of stability in which we continue to adhere to EU rules, and a second phase of transition in which amendments could be made to payment schemes to simplify and improve issues around livestock inspections and farm mapping.

Scotland has the only plan in the UK to deal with the ravages of Brexit, but Scotland is not responsible for the UK’s Brexit. We did not vote for it and we did not want it. Indeed, this Government are doing all they can to lock us out of their plans. We heard from the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr about the plans for the power grab. Is it not unusual that all the powers that have been grabbed from Scotland and taken by the Westminster Government are on animal welfare or agriculture? The idea of trying to secure a UK single market is, for us, a creation of the UK superstate, administered centrally from Westminster, and the devolved Governments are to be locked out.

Finally, what about the EU convergence uplift payments that Scotland was supposed to get? All that money was earned in Scotland. We enabled the UK Government to qualify for a £190 million payment, yet Scotland has secured only £30 million of that back. When are we going to see that money? Agriculture and upland farming are vital to Scotland. We need to hear solid plans for what the Government will do as we leave the EU.
**5.58 pm**

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. We have had a very interesting debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on introducing it. It is vital that we tease out where we are going on these important matters. We have had contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), and the hon. Members for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as well as from the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

I will keep my remarks very short, so that the Minister has plenty of time to respond. We have heard about the contribution that the uplands make to agriculture through lamb and beef, so I will not repeat those points. I want to look at some of the environmental issues, and I am indebted to the National Farmers Union, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust, the Countryside Alliance, and Compassion in World Farming, which have all written to me about the debate.

If we look at the figures about the contribution that the uplands make to the environment, approximately one quarter of the total area of English and Welsh woodlands is in the uplands. The largest remaining tracts of semi-natural habitats in England and Wales are found in the uplands. The uplands are home to 55% of England’s and 40% of Wales’ sites of special scientific interest. The uplands are home to many rare animals and birds, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland made clear. They are the source of 70% of our drinking water. Last but not least, they are a store of 40% of England’s and 80% of Wales’ soil carbon. I could go on about the importance of the national parks, some 12% of land in England is in the upland areas, but it constitutes 75% of the world’s heather moorland. Some 70% of our upland areas are in national parks. The uplands are also home to important, vibrant rural communities. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr discussed the position in Wales and the importance of the uplands to rural communities there, and I agree with him on that.

The truth is that future agriculture policy will be devolved. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland already have some, albeit limited, scope within EU schemes to design their own approaches; we have been clear that we want them to have as much freedom as possible to design schemes and approaches that work for their own agriculture. We want them to have more freedom than they have now under EU schemes.

**Mr Geoffrey Cox** (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): Might I put in a plea on behalf of Dartmoor farmers, whom I met recently? The one thing that matters most to them is that they are involved and consulted closely in designing whatever schemes come forward from Brexit. In that context, may I commend to the Minister the Dartmoor Farming Futures initiative? It is having conspicuous success in uniting farmers throughout the Dartmoor area in designing outcomes, including livestock numbers, and turning out and taking off dates. It is a model scheme. In considering how upland farming support should go forward, I urge him to look at that scheme closely.

**George Eustice**: I can reassure my hon. and learned Friend that I have already looked at that scheme; I visited it two years ago. The Dartmoor Farming Futures project can show us the way, and it is something that we can learn from. It has been developed as a pilot, as a bit of a derogation from existing EU rules. As we think about future policies, we are keen to work out how we can tailor them to an individual area and focus more on outcomes, rather than processes and inputs.

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), we are making a bespoke arrangement for the future. The Dartmoor scheme has huge amounts to recommend it, but in the meantime, many of our stewardship schemes will run on even if they have run out?

**Neil Parish**: Will they run on even if they have run out?

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**6.1 pm**

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice)**: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this important debate on upland farming after we leave the European Union.

The uplands have some of our most beautiful landscapes. Some 12% of land in England is in the upland areas, but it constitutes 75% of the world’s heather moorland. Some 70% of our upland areas are in national parks. The uplands are also home to important, vibrant rural communities. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr discussed the position in Wales and the importance of the uplands to rural communities there, and I agree with him on that.

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**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox), we are making a bespoke arrangement for the future. The Dartmoor scheme has huge amounts to recommend it, but in the meantime, many of our stewardship schemes will run on even if they have run out. Otherwise, many of these schemes will fall, and instead of getting more environmental benefits, we might get fewer. I am very concerned about that.

**George Eustice**: I was going to come back to that. We will be absolutely certain that the existing countryside stewardship schemes will run on and be funded. Some of the agreements will outlive our membership of the European Union; they will continue to be funded until we have successor schemes in place.

**Neil Parish**: Will they run on even if they have run out?
George Eustice: We will ensure that we have the new schemes in place by the time those agreements start to run out.

As I said, this area is devolved. It is recognised by everyone that there will be a need for some UK frameworks, particularly when it comes to delivering international obligations such as our obligations to the World Trade Organisation, which I will return to, but also in ensuring integrity in the UK single market. We are taking two approaches. There will be areas where things may be reserved—for instance, where they are directly attributable to international trade and international agreements that we have entered into. There will be others where we can construct frameworks through memorandums of understanding. There is already a lot of quite detailed work being done in that space.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr asked about our working with the Welsh Government. I reassure him that we are in regular dialogue with Ministers from across the devolved Administrations and that, at an official level, there has been incredibly close working on developing, for instance, the statutory instruments that we all need to bring forward in our various legislatures under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. There is a lot of close working on that. We have also done some quite detailed work on what future frameworks would look like, looking policy line by policy line at where we think a memorandum of understanding would work, what we think can be fully devolved and what we think should be reserved. That work is at an advanced stage.

We should be positive here. We can look forward to a future where we all have far more power. Under current schemes, we are told the minimum and maximum width of a hedge, what width a gateway is allowed to be, what types of crops someone can grow and whether they can claim that a cabbage is the same as a cauliflower or winter wheat is the same as spring wheat.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the issue of the frustrations regarding countryside stewardship schemes. I agree with him. Farmers should be able to enrol on those schemes in any month of the year, but get this: we used to be able to do that, under the old schemes. The European Commission proposed that we change to a common commencement date for everyone. The UK opposed that vociferously, but the EU ignored us. As a result, we have an administrative nightmare, trying to put all these schemes in place on the same start date. We can leave all that behind and no longer fret about disallowance risks.

We had a consultation earlier this year on future agricultural policy, in particular as it relates to England. We have had over 44,000 responses. We are clear that there will be an agriculture Bill in this Session of Parliament, but we have also made a few other things clear. In our manifesto, we committed to keeping the budget the same in cash terms for the duration of this Parliament, out until 2022. We were clear in our manifesto that we would replace the common agricultural policy with the future funded scheme, to be rolled out thereafter.

We have also been clear that we think we can spend the money better, focusing it on the delivery of public goods and environmental outcomes, rather than on arbitrary payments based on how much land people own or control, which clearly makes no sense if we are seeking coherent policy. Finally, we have been clear that we recognise that there is quite a lot of dependency on the basic payment scheme and area-based payments. We will make changes gradually, over an agricultural transition period running for a number of years. We have invited suggestions on that in our consultation.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Before the Minister moves away from discussing the funding arrangements, could he assure me that, in designing a future funding arrangement, the Government will look at ensuring there is a period of similar length—perhaps five or seven years? That gives certainty to farmers that a shorter period simply would not.

George Eustice: There have been a number of representations about how long that period should be. Most people have suggested that somewhere in the region of five years or possibly a little bit more makes sense. As the Secretary of State has indicated for illustrative purposes, something in the ballpark of five years seems to make sense and seems to be where the consensus is.

We also recognise that we need to help businesses prepare during the transition. We recognise that we may need to take account of the less favoured area status of some areas, particularly the more financially vulnerable upland areas and of the impact on those rural communities. We are certainly willing to do that, and we flagged the potential need for it in our consultation.

However, there is more than one way to approach this. We could continue with something similar to what we have now, but a number of organisations representing upland interests have actually said to me that they see great opportunities in the principles and the approach that we advocate. For instance, the Uplands Alliance told us that it was very keen to move to a system of payment for the delivery of public goods. It makes a powerful point, because at the moment the uplands, and particularly the moorlands, get less area payment because they are deemed to be disadvantaged areas on less productive land. That could not be more upside down.

In fact, they potentially have the opportunity to deliver more by way of public goods, in terms of public access, flood mitigation, carbon sequestration, peat bog restoration or improvements in water quality. There are many opportunities for the uplands to deliver those public goods, and several people are starting to say that, if we are serious about payment for the delivery of public goods, they see a vibrant, profitable model for upland farming.

We also set out, in an annexe attached to our consultation, ideas about the type or flavour of the options that we might offer. We have about 30 years of experience in various environmental land management schemes. For instance, even in the current schemes there are options for enclosed rough grazing, the management of moorland, the protection of native breeds and the shepherdling supplement. We also have grants for stonewall protection, hedgerow restoration, the maintenance of weather-proof traditional farm buildings in remote locations and haymaking. There are many options within those existing schemes, and we have a lot of experience of making them work.

I will turn to some of the points made by hon. Members. The sheep sector is very important for Wales. There are 10 million sheep—around 30% of the UK total—and some 14,000 holdings with sheep, many of which
George Eustice: are in disadvantaged areas. It will be for the Welsh Government to design a policy that works for their own farmers and their own circumstances. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr mentioned how closely we are working with the Welsh Government. As I pointed out earlier, very detailed working is going on. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) highlighted some of the great work being done on Exmoor, and I very much agree with him. I visited the mires project, run by South West Water and other local partners on Exmoor, and some innovative policy thinking is going on there.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) raised a number of issues relating to trade. I do not accept that we need a customs union, but we need a customs agreement. That is exactly what the Government seek—a comprehensive, bold free trade agreement with no tariffs and agreed customs arrangements. I do not agree that we need absolute uniformity on regulations. It is possible for us to recognise equivalence, since our starting point is that we are departing the single market; we are not a country with a very different regulatory tradition.

The hon. Lady also asked about the WTO. We believe that we should treat this as technical rectification, and we are working with the European Union to split our WTO schedules, both on tariff-rate quotas and aggregate market support, which is the ceiling on market support and subsidies that can be paid to farmers. Those will simply be divided based on historical use, which we do not believe will provide us with any problems.

Finally, on future trade deals with other countries, we have been crystal clear that we have standards and values that we will not abandon, and we will not abandon or compromise our standards in pursuit of a trade deal.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister confirm that, if the Government do not seek the endorsement of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly on our trade policy, we will effectively have a situation in which those three constituent parts of the UK will have less power and influence over our trade policy than Wallonia has over trade policy at EU level?

George Eustice: I do not really think that that is the case. At the moment, none of us have much influence over trade policy, because it is decided by the European Union. I know that my colleagues in the Department for International Trade are working closely with colleagues in the devolved Administrations to work out a sensible approach to our future trade agreements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) is passionate about farmers in his constituency and made the important point that we need to carry farmers with us on this journey. I agree that we cannot deliver the outcomes that we seek without the support of farmers to deliver them.

We have had a good and comprehensive debate covering many issues, with powerful contributions from Members from every single part of the UK. I believe that these are exciting times as we face the future. We should see this as an opportunity, not a threat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future of upland farming after the UK leaves the EU.
Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the provision of healthcare on English islands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the Speaker’s Office for granting this debate and the Minister for coming to respond to it.

I will outline three arguments. First, I will explain why I believe Isle of Wight health services remain underfunded compared with the mainland. My trust believes that that underfunding ranges from £5 million to £8 million just for acute services. Secondly, I will ask why the Isle of Wight is the only UK island, separated by sea, without NHS-subsidised travel. I believe that is deeply unfair to my constituents. Thirdly, I will suggest ways in which we can help both the Department of Health and Social Care to deliver better health and social care on the Island through the creation of a single public services authority for local government and health, and the Island to become a national leader, as it has done in the past, in improving Government services by combining them.

By way of background, I start by paying tribute to the Island’s NHS staff, who do a wonderful job delivering NHS healthcare provision. We greatly value their professionalism and dedication. I also acknowledge the work of the Island’s NHS leadership in the clinical commissioning group and the trust, and the work of Maggie Oldham and Vaughan Thomas specifically. Along with their wider teams, they do a challenging job in difficult circumstances, and I am hugely grateful for their work and that of everybody in the health services, including medics and ambulance staff, and our public services.

I have called this debate both as Member for the Isle of Wight and as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for UK islands. The purpose of the APPG is to promote the needs of island communities within Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to advocate for their economic and social wellbeing, the provision of high-quality, accessible public services, and affordable transport arrangements, which are particularly pertinent to the Island I have the privilege of representing. The issues I am raising today focus directly on those matters.

Today’s subject follows earlier debates that I or the APPG have called on the economies and public services of UK islands. Due to devolution, this debate is largely focused on English islands, meaning primarily the Isle of Wight, whose population is approximately 140,000, and the much smaller Isles of Scilly, which I believe have a population of about 1,500.

As I have previously raised, there are additional costs associated with providing public services in island communities. The University of Portsmouth has issued a peer-reviewed report showing that the extra costs of providing local government services on the Isle of Wight are some £6.4 million a year. Coincidentally, that is similar to the amount of money that Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles get, despite having much smaller populations.

Those principles work for healthcare provision as well. I believe there are significant additional costs to providing services on the Isle of Wight. As I have said, we have a population of 143,000. That is half the size of a population that would usually have a district general hospital, so we are very grateful to have such a hospital and its great staff. However, because our helicopters do not fly 24 hours a day and sometimes the ferries do not go at night, the Island needs a maternity unit. Women cannot give birth in a helicopter. We need paediatrics and we need A&E. Our funding is naturally and obviously skewed by our environment, and because of that there is an argument that we are unable to properly fund some of the other services we need.

An additional problem is that if the trust has a full-time consultant on its books and pays them for their expertise while, in effect, using them only three days a week, or if the maternity consultant is not being used to his full capacity because, although we do need a maternity unit, ours is not as active as that of the average district general hospital, those consultants are not getting the required hours on their ticket, to put it in layman’s terms. That causes diseconomies of scale. One solution is to work much more closely with Southampton and Portsmouth. That is critical to our future, and it is going to happen.

Our costs are also exacerbated by the demographic profile of Isle of Wight residents. We have a lot of young people, as the Isle of Wight festival proved, but it is also the case that 24% of our population are aged over 65, and that percentage will increase. As the Minister and I discussed before the debate, there is an argument that NHS funding for those over 80 is not generous enough, because of the more focused health requirements of people of those advanced ages. Given that a fair chunk of our population are over 80, we have significant pressures. More than 2,700 residents are living with dementia, which is double the national average per constituency.

We are experiencing a growing financial challenge. Our CCG is £19 million above its target funding. The Island overall receives £233 million to fund its healthcare services. The CCG and the trust are seeking to make £19.1 million savings this year, which will still leave cost pressures. The rise in our funding has been marginal compared with that in trusts and CCGs elsewhere in the UK. Those very small rises in funding are now having a very negative effect, and I would appreciate the Minister looking closely at that.

Financial modelling undertaken as part of the acute services redesign shows that even if services are reconfigured to the maximum extent, there will still be a gap between the costs of funding services for the Island population and the amount of money its NHS receives. Our trust believes that the cost, even under our most ambitious plans, is between £5.3 million and £8 million. That is just for the delivery of acute services, if I understand correctly.

My first suggestion to the Minister is that he accept that there are additional costs associated with providing those services on the Island. This is not a case of special
pleading: it is merely an acceptance that the Island’s healthcare structure has exceptional circumstances by dint of being separated from the mainland. The Minister could build us a fixed link, at a cost of about £3 billion, or we can argue about the extra millions needed to properly fund the NHS.

I strongly welcome the Secretary of State’s recent announcement of a new long-term funding plan for the NHS, which is a clear sign of our party’s commitment to ensuring that the NHS continues its world-class provision—but I want to ensure that some of that funding comes my way. I would be grateful if the Minister would continue that conversation and meet our Island NHS leadership, so that he and his officials can understand the extra costs in detail.

I also want to propose a way that we on the Island can work more effectively with the integration of public services. I hope that idea will be attractive to the Minister and his officials. As I have said, we are not looking for special treatment, but we are looking for fairer funding. I place emphasis on both provision and access because we want to provide as many services as possible on the Island, and enabling access . However, there are increased arrangements in place for healthcare, to ensure that services to the mainland, particularly for patients who wish to see the services on the mainland, but we also need access to the mainland for when some of our Islanders need to go to Southampton or Portsmouth for specialist services such as radiotherapy.

There will be a small decrease in the number of visits to the mainland, but a small rise in the number of more specialised healthcare appointments there.

As the Minister may know, the NHS trust has laid out a series of options for the future of healthcare on the Isle of Wight. I seek Government support for its more ambitious aim of taking back more bread-and-butter acute services to the Island, thereby requiring fewer trips to the mainland, rather than the current option of slightly fewer services on the Island and slightly more on the mainland. We will discuss that at length.

The local care finance system has undertaken a detailed assessment of how to strike the appropriate balance between providing services within the shores of the Island and enabling access to the mainland. However, there are increased patient safety risks associated with any shift of more services to the mainland, particularly for patients who may be frail and in need of swift access to services.

My constituents have made it clear, through a range of public engagement exercises, that they wish to see the maximum retention of services on the Island, and they join me in asking the Government to ensure that that is recognised in any future funding. As recently as two weeks ago, the Isle of Wight County Press and Isle of Wight Radio hosted a question time event with representatives of the Isle of Wight NHS at which the Island-mainland split in services was debated. My constituents’ views were clear: where possible, the retention of services on the Island should be a priority. I therefore urge the Minister to carefully examine the funding arrangements in place for healthcare, to ensure that those needs are met.

I also ask that we examine the issue of patient travel and how visits to the mainland from the Island are funded. As I have said, the Isle of Wight is the only UK island with no subsidised ferry travel to support local residents in accessing specialised services on the mainland. I will not dwell on arrangements for Scottish islands, because they are part of a wider mechanism and their arrangements are devolved.

The National Health Service (Travel Expenses and Remission of Charges) Regulations 2003 set out that any resident of the Isles of Scilly not entitled to payment in full of NHS travel expenses in accordance with low-income criteria will pay a maximum of £5 for their travel costs. A document from the Cornish CCG, NHS Kernow, also sets out that residents of the Isles of Scilly have to pay only £5 towards the cost of NHS-funded patient transport to the mainland. Furthermore, if it is deemed necessary that the patient needs an escort, a further maximum payment of £5 will be applicable.

I have talked about the matter with my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), who represents the Isles of Scilly. I am delighted that residents of the Isles of Scilly benefit from such an arrangement, but why is it not available to my constituents as well? Although some on the Isle of Wight meet the narrow definition of being on a low income and would benefit from having such costs met, many other residents have to regularly access healthcare treatment on the mainland—such as those with prostate cancer, who may need 40 trips—and face difficulty in affording the associated and oft repeated costs. I believe it is inequitable and unfair for one set of English islands to enjoy such a benefit when others do not. It is yet another example of the Isle of Wight’s not being treated fairly.

The arrangements for Isle of Wight residents travelling to the mainland for operations and medical appointments are much less generous, and exist only due to the co-operation of our three cross-Solent operators. Red Funnel offers a special return ferry fare; Wightlink offers a discount for both vehicle and foot passengers plus a patient escort; and Hovertravel offers a 20% discount on day returns. I am grateful to those operators for putting those arrangements in place, and to the NHS on the Isle of Wight for negotiating them, but the reality is that even with such discounts, the cost of trips to access healthcare on the mainland can place a great financial burden on patients, which is at odds with the NHS’s founding principle of being free at the point of delivery.

I therefore ask the Minister to amend the 2003 regulations to extend that statutory requirement to the Isle of Wight, as well as the Isles of Scilly. That would be a significant step forward and would have a transformational effect on the lives of many of my constituents who go to the mainland for treatment. Around 32,000 return visits are undertaken a year. Under option 3, that would be about 30,000, while under option 4 it would be about 27,000 or 28,000. We are talking about numbers in the low tens of thousands, and funding those visits would require relatively small amounts of money.

However, as those visits are in the tens of thousands, and because our CCG is struggling for money, I ask that any such arrangements do not have a budgetary impact, either on Cornwall’s or the Isle of Wight’s CCGs, and that the cost of funding the discount comes directly out of the NHS budget. That would be recognition that English islands should be treated similarly to Scottish islands, and of the cost of going to the mainland from the Isles of Scilly or the Isle of Wight. Under this plan, patients and their escorts would pay no more than £5 to travel to the mainland for treatment. I believe that to be...
a fair and reasonable gesture for the Government to make, and I ask for that change to be brought forward, along with the changes to the 2003 regulations to allow the Isle of Wight to benefit from statutory obligations.

There is also the issue of travel for families. Staying overnight in a mainland hospital brings about financial pressures for my constituents. I appreciate that the 2003 regulations do not provide for support in these cases, but if the Minister was generous enough to consider those changes, and to find the small amount of money to fund directly the £5 fare for people seeking treatment, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives and I could go back to the ferry companies serving our respective islands and see if they would be generous enough to make similar provision for patients’ visitors. Someone from Ventnor, Cowes or Ryde who was going to hospital in Southampton on the mainland would pay £5 to get to the hospital, but their families often pay full whack on the ferries. That is not cheap. If we changed those arrangements, we could talk to the ferry companies about providing properly recognised and organised support to families visiting their loved ones in hospital. That would be a generous gesture to the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight.

I am grateful to the Minister for listening, and I will raise one other issue. To recap, the Isle of Wight is not properly funded, and my folks—my constituents—are hard done by when traveling to the mainland. Do not get me wrong; we love being an island, but we seek fair funding to mitigate the effect of the Solent, which is often overlooked by the Government. However, I am here not just to ask, but to offer. We on the Island are already committed to integrating health and social care as much as possible, and I believe that Islanders would be delighted, with Government support, to lead the way in delivering best practice in the integration of council, health and adult social care services.

For example, we have the “My Life a Full Life” programme, which is a collaboration between the Isle of Wight CCG, the NHS trust and the Isle of Wight Council. The programme works in partnership with local people, voluntary organisations and the private sector to deliver a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of health and social care for older people and people with long-term conditions on the Island.

My aim is to keep as many young people on the Island as possible, to build an economy for them, and to get a university and improve our education system. However, at the same time, it is critical that we become a leader in ensuring quality of life in later life. We are naturally drawn towards integrating our services, because we are a small island, so we have the potential to be a national leader in this. “My Life a Full Life” is a great idea, but it arguably has not reached the point that it should, because we still have siloed organisations. There are bureaucratic hurdles to overcome in combining the leadership of those organisations, but ensuring their full integration could save a considerable amount of money on appointments, which could then be put back into frontline services.

I would like to acknowledge the work of all those involved on the Island in delivering some really good programmes that we have for integration, but particularly Councillors David Stewart and Clare Mosdell, along with professional officers such as Dr Carol Tozer, the director of adult social care. They have established a local care board, and it is already bringing the services together as part of our One Public Service vision for the Island, but it is still not combined structurally and in terms of leadership and governance.

At the moment, the Government provide one pot of money to local government on the Island, another to fund the Isle of Wight NHS, and another to the CCG. Does it have to be that rigid? Can we aspire to a situation in which one combined funding pot is made available for public service provision on the Island, thereby increasing the requirement for deeper and more meaningful integration? Such circumstances may require combining the governance and leadership of public services. It is important to explore that, and there are questions about the role of experts, certainly in healthcare and adult social care provision.

I ask the Minister to explore, with his ministerial colleagues, whether there is an appetite for creating a unique public authority on the Isle of Wight that combines traditional local government functions with those of NHS trusts, the CCG, adult social care, mental health services and so on. If such a fully combined and integrated approach can work anywhere, it should work on the Island. Such a step would be a natural progression from the integrated way in which we are trying to work; we are trying to overcome those siloed, bureaucratic, financial hurdles. Clearly, if we achieved that, we would ensure that the input of healthcare professionals was still very much at the forefront of decision making. I urge the Minister to work with us as closely as possible on that, because that could be a valuable exercise that could be repeated elsewhere, perhaps in more isolated communities, and in places where the combination of healthcare and public service could achieve real public good and address public need.

I will not talk for much longer; I will just make a couple of other points briefly. I am grateful to you, Mr Hanson, for allowing me to speak at length.

I want to talk about digital solutions. Again, we are not the only part of Britain that is isolated, but clearly the Solent is a boundary and border for us. I find the situation slightly ridiculous. Yes, if people need to go to Southampton for an operation, that is great, but do they need to go there for every pre-op appointment? Do they need to go to Southampton or Portsmouth for every post-op appointment? We were talking about this earlier. We need to find the greatest centres of expertise in Britain and be able to buy in those services. Perhaps people can have their appointment in Southampton, Reading, London or Portsmouth, but can have their pre-op using digital technology—telemedicine. We need to be much more efficient in how we use that.

Again, we are not the only isolated part of Britain. However, I am offering the Island to NHS England as a pioneer in not only integrated services, but how we use advances in telemedicine and all those other wonderful things. Also relevant is data collection. The NHS does not use data terribly well, if I understand correctly. In relation to data for preventive medicine, we are small enough to be manageable. Social scientists love us because we are geographically isolated; we are clearly, in a very geographically obvious way, measurable. And for relatively small amounts of money we can do research into what could be done on the use of data in relation to preventive medicine, telemedicine and integration—the combining of health and adult social care.
As well as saying, “Please look at our funding”, because we have funding problems on the Island, we have special needs that have never, ever been recognised. I find the situation shocking, frankly. The Government, with the best will in the world, try to be fair. They fund the Scottish islands via the Scottish Government; they give them extra money. Anglesey has a bridge; the Scilly Isles have a small population anyway. However, the Government permanently function without taking into account my constituency. I know that they do not mean to do that, but our circumstances are unique, in that we are isolated by water, and that has never been recognised. When isolation factors are looked at, we never seem to qualify.

We are not properly funded, but we would like to be, and I would like the Government to look seriously at the struggle that some Islanders face in paying for the travel to the mainland when they go for treatment. I am offering the Government suggestions of ways in which the Island could be used as a test case, as a national leader, to integrate services better, to use data better and to combine all these functions, using telemedicine, to create a world-class service on the Island. That could be used not only to deliver great healthcare to my residents, but as a national role model for others.

9.55 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) on securing the debate and on his very knowledgeable presentation of his constituents’ concerns and views. It is clear that health services on the Isle of Wight face challenges that, as he eloquently set out, are unique and require a tailored approach. However, there are similarities between the experiences that he reported and people’s experiences with health services throughout England.

When we think of the geography of England, there can be too little appreciation of the fact that England covers just five eighths of Great Britain, and includes more than 100 islands. Those islands are an intrinsic part of our nation, as you will know, Mr Hanson. Not too far from both our constituencies is Hilbre Island, which, although it has no resident population, is an important part of our area’s history and culture. Like Hilbre, the vast majority of islands do not have a permanent population. Most of those that do are connected to the mainland by road—examples are Canvey Island in Essex and Portsea Island in Hampshire—and, as a result, their healthcare services are very integrated with those of the surrounding areas.

As we have heard, however, there are islands, including the Isle of Wight, the Isles of Scilly and Holy Island, that are accessible only by sea and air, and they do not benefit from such ease of access. That poses serious challenges, particularly for the smaller islands, especially in emergencies, which of course cannot be planned for.

Before discussing the points made by the hon. Gentleman about the Isle of Wight, I will touch on the situation on some of the other islands in England. Many do not have their own medical facilities providing emergency care, because of their smaller populations. With the exception of the Isle of Wight, all our islands are served by NHS organisations based on the mainland. For those with road access, ambulances from the mainland can reach patients without undue difficulty. However, those without access have had to develop local approaches to providing support. Much of that support comes from volunteer community first responders, who reach patients before an ambulance can arrive to provide first aid.

On behalf of the Opposition, I pay tribute to all those who give their time to such services. They provide a vital lifeline in their communities. We do not speak enough about the role that volunteers play in our health service. I have seen for myself during a stint at my local ambulance station how volunteer responders can play an important role in assisting paid professionals. On that occasion, it was in a rural location, but the principles about access and timely intervention also apply there.

I understand that last year a volunteer first responder group was launched on Holy Island, which as we all know is inaccessible at high tide. Supported by the North East Ambulance Service, the group plays an extremely valuable role. There are similar groups across many of our islands.

In the time that I have served on the Front Bench, I have been privileged to visit several air ambulance services. They, too, play an extremely valuable role in providing urgent care in isolated areas. Again, much is down to efforts by volunteers and to fundraising, as they are of course charities. There was a reception at Parliament yesterday for the various regional air ambulances, and I was very pleased to see a great many parliamentarians attend to show their support. It is concerning to consider what the position would be for our island communities if those volunteer organisations were not involved.

Aside from the Isle of Wight, the Isles of Scilly are our most populous islands that can be accessed only by air or sea. Despite five of those islands being inhabited, there is just one minor injuries unit, at St Mary’s, so the island is hugely reliant on the five ambulance all-terrain vehicles that serve the island. Many non-emergency procedures have to take place on the mainland because of the need to access specialised treatment for conditions. The cost of accessing that treatment is usually met by the patient, when they are not in receipt of qualifying benefits. That can cause problems for a number of individuals.

As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight said, for those who live on the Isles of Scilly, a £5 concessionary fare on the Skybus to the mainland is available, but that covers the cost of the journey only from St Mary’s to Land’s End; there is the additional cost of the remainder of the journey. However, that is still a better situation than the hon. Gentleman’s constituents enjoy—or not, as the case may be. It was perfectly reasonable for him to raise that anomaly, which he described as an inequitable situation. He was also right to raise the issue of families travelling to the mainland. It is important that those faced with an extended stay in hospital have the support of family and friends.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight set out three main arguments to show that his constituents are in a different position. He believes that the Isle of Wight is underfunded generally—when it comes to health Wovices. He made the point that it is the only English island separated from the mainland by sea that is without any...
kind of subsidy for patient travel. He also expressed a

desire to integrate public services, particularly health
and social care. He raised a point about the extra cost of
providing public services on the Island, because of
reduced capacity; that was no surprise to hon. Members.
He said that services such as A&E and maternity are
needed on the Island, because it is not possible to travel
to the mainland in every emergency. He set out very well
how that sometimes creates diseconomies of scale, and
problems that require more working with mainland
providers.

The hon. Gentleman made comparisons with the
funding increases for other CCGs in recent years. He
expressed a desire for his constituency to become a
national leader in integrating local services. He will be
aware that up and down the country there are a great
many plans at various stages of development. It is clear
that many communities are heading in the direction of
greater integration between health and social care. On
that point, I would be grateful if the Minister could
indicate in his response whether he believes there is any
need for legislation to bolster this development, particularly
in terms of safeguards around governance and standards.

Earlier this year, the Labour party conducted a coastal
communities consultation, which extended to the islands.
The issues we have discussed this morning are exactly
the kind of things that a future Labour Government
would be keen to look at. We have heard that the Isle of
Wight is a unique island in our nation, with such a large
population being dependent on ferries to get to the
mainland. As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight set
out, the Island’s unique status has led to a unique
response, in terms of the configuration of health services.
The Isle of Wight NHS Trust is the only integrated
acute, community, mental health and ambulance healthcare
provider in England. The hon. Gentleman wants to
increase integration further. As we also heard, in addition
to the geographical challenges, there are demographic
issues on the Isle of Wight. Its proportion of residents
aged 80-plus is above the national average. That has an
additional impact on health and social care costs. The
proportion of patients with dementia is double the national
average.

In response to some of the unique challenges the
Island is facing, a service reconfiguration is being planned
through the Hampshire and Isle of Wight sustainability
and transformation partnership. That involves 89% of
current hospital-based care remaining on the Island, with
11% of more complex and specialist treatments
being provided on the mainland. It is clear that the hon.
Gentleman would like as many of those treatments as
possible to be dealt with directly on the Island, and for
his constituents not to have to travel to the mainland to
access them. I appreciate that that will not always be
achievable, but I seek the Minister’s assurances that he
will consider the measures that can be put in place to
support those patients who will have to travel, and will
often be in a vulnerable condition as a result of that.
Will he confirm that the changes proposed are based on
eclinical, rather than financial, priorities? Will he also
confirm that proposals will not lead to a reduction in
the overall number of beds on the Isle of Wight? The
STP document states:

“There would be no change in capacity at St Mary’s until
actual changes in activity are put in place”.

That suggests that there may be some reduction in
bed numbers.

The Isle of Wight NHS Trust was again rated inadequate
by the Care Quality Commission as recently as April, and
it remains in special measures. No fewer than 233 incidents
were reported in which the NHS was found to be failing
to meet its obligations to residents of the Island. I
would be grateful if the Minister said what he is doing
to improve the trust’s performance. The report recognised
that there were some improvements, although those can
never come quickly enough.

Finally, while many of the challenges facing our
health service on the islands are unique, there are also
many similarities in the challenges we face. One of those
similarities is in the financial pressures trusts are facing
as a result of the longest and most sustained period of
financial constraint the NHS has ever faced. As a result
of that, performance has deteriorated. Take the example
of the four-hour A&E target, which the Secretary of
State described as being critical for safe care. In 2010-11,
99% of patients were seen within four hours on the Isle
of Wight, whereas today that figure has fallen to 88%.
Some 22% of Isle of Wight cancer patients wait more
than two months for treatment, which, again, represents
a significant deterioration. That is not uncommon within
other parts of the NHS.

The financial challenges faced by the Isle of Wight
NHS Trust are deeply concerning, as the hon. Member
for Isle of Wight set out, and I believe that they can be
directly traced to years of austerity. As we have heard,
the trust and the CCG will end the year in a significant
deficit. The trust is having to take out more than
£1.5 million in loans each month, which will have to be
repaid. We have heard reference to the additional funding
announcements made by the Prime Minister last week.
We should acknowledge that those funding announcements,
if they are delivered on, will represent nothing more
than a standstill position, rather than an improvement
on the current situation. It has also been confirmed that
social care, capital spending and public health are excluded
from that announcement.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Isle of
Wight for the impressive way he set out the issues facing
his constituents, and the unique challenges that face those
on the Isle of Wight and our other islands. Giving the
NHS the funding that it needs is at the core of all that.

10.8 am

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): It is a
pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.
I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of
Wight (Mr Seely) for raising the issue in the way that he has.
He has used Westminster Hall exactly as it should
be used—to bring the concerns of his constituents front
and centre before the House. He set out not only the
challenges faced, but the ways forward and a number of
solutions for different issues. In short, he raised issues
of funding that relate to population and geography,
travel, the potential for further integration, and also a
way forward involving digital and data. I will address
each of those in turn.

This is also a timely debate, as the shadow Minister
mentioned following the Prime Minister’s announcement
at the Royal Free Hospital last week of a significant
funding boost to the NHS. Alongside that, NHS leaders
are drafting a long-term, 10-year plan on services, which
will look at many of the issues he cited in his speech.
As we start that journey with NHS leaders, bringing the issues of the Isle of Wight front and centre is timely and helpful.

I would segment the funding formula issue into two: the challenges that the Island has in common with other parts of the country, such as those posed by the over-80s and by the significant number of constituents with dementia, and those that are unique to it. Indeed, few hon. Members feel that their constituents’ circumstances do not merit being higher up the funding formula than they currently sit. It is valid to raise those issues, and NHS England will look at them on the advice of the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, which advises on the funding formula. Those decisions are common to other areas, but they need to be made in respect of the Island. If my hon. Friend wishes, I am happy to facilitate a meeting with NHS England so the funding pressures pertaining to the demographics of the Island can be raised. He will recognise that the setting of the funding formula is an independent process.

There are specific issues about the geography that my hon. Friend raised very well, not least about maternity services and paediatrics. The Island needs to supply those services and that will have an impact on its funding. I am happy to look at those issues. Integration is one way that headroom will be facilitated to meet those challenges. As he said, the Island was a vanguard site that has received £8.4 million of extra funding since 2015 to facilitate the transformation of services. That funding recognised some of the Island’s specific geographical challenges.

Although geography can be, and is in certain areas, a disadvantage and a driver of cost, it is also a driver of opportunity, as my hon. Friend set out. The Island has a strong sense of place and identity, and there are strong personal links between key decision makers and stakeholders. As the shadow Minister rightly said, the move towards greater integration between health and social care—as is reflected in the name of the Department—is also an opportunity to drive integration between the council and health services. My hon. Friend alluded to the bureaucratic obstacles to that, and I am happy to work with him to overcome them. As patients present with multiple conditions and as we move away from silos of care to a more holistic approach to patients and their wellbeing, the Island offers a huge opportunity for greater integration.

On my hon. Friend’s point about data, I had an interesting meeting yesterday with the chief executive of the Christie in Manchester, which is one of our outstanding trusts. I was struck by the fact that 19% of its patients take part in medical research programmes. The chief executive set out how that is hugely beneficial to the patients, who get access to cutting-edge drugs and the latest thinking. He has also been able to attract some of the world-leading figures in research because he has a population that researchers can work for, which is very attractive to them. That is a real win-win, and the demographics of the Island offer an opportunity in that regard.

Mr Seely: One point that I did not make was that when it comes to looking at dementia, the Island would be very open to becoming a national leader or a place where academics and researchers could investigate how we can live better with dementia in this country. We have double the national average of people with dementia, so it would be a natural fit for us.

Stephen Barclay: I am keen to work with my hon. Friend on that, because the Government have prioritised their research and development budget, as I know from my time at the Treasury. A significant investment has also been made in health R&D. The NHS has an opportunity to combine its patient data with our world-leading universities and R&D to attract researchers, drive forward the most innovative approach on healthcare and translate that cutting-edge research into day-to-day care. That can be a frustration for our constituents; it is fine to have the research, but we need to roll it out to scale in a way that is meaningful for patients. The challenge of the Island’s geography is also a huge advantage to it. I do not know what percentage of its patients are taking part in research, but that may be an area for him to explore and for the Department to work with him on.

My hon. Friend also raised the potential of digital. He will be aware that the Secretary of State has asked Dr Eric Topol, one of the world leaders on the use of digital in healthcare, to undertake a report for the Department. My hon. Friend is right that rather than a patient having to be physically present in all instances, as was traditionally the case, there is scope to use digital much more for them to see a consultant online and for information to be sent digitally. I recognise that if the clinical commissioning group is in deficit, finding the headroom to invest in that technology becomes a trade-off and a challenge, but that is one of the opportunities that will be opened up by the Prime Minister’s investment in the NHS and it is an area that the 10-year forward view will specifically examine.

In terms of timing, the Island has a chance to look at how it can become a leader, what has been done with digital enablers and early adopters in the NHS, and in which areas it can lead on in technology. I will come on to the challenges of travel, but reducing the need for journeys is a more sustainable solution than seeking to subsidise them. Our starting point should be how we can use technology to reduce the need for as many journeys, rather than how we can subsidise more journeys. That offers significant scope.

On travel, I heard my hon. Friend’s remarks about the cost and its wider impact on families. There is a correlation with a separate debate we have had about car parking charges. Clearly, there are specific challenges related to travel, but as he also set out, it is quite complex, because there are already arrangements with the ferry companies and national schemes for subsidies and assistance that can be given to people who are financially challenged. It is a question of looking at how we can fit in with the existing schemes and what agreements can be reached with the companies concerned. I am happy to meet him to pick up on that specific point to better understand our current approach and what can be done, given the challenges. Again, the challenge of distance is not unique to the Island, but as he mentioned, there are certain features of travel to the Isle of Wight and the Scilly Isles that pose challenges.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, the NHS healthcare travel cost scheme provides financial help for travel costs for patients on low incomes who are referred.
The scheme is part of the NHS’s low-income scheme, under which people are also entitled to free prescriptions and glasses. Under the scheme, the full cost of transport can be reimbursed by the NHS to eligible patients. Schemes are in place, but I hear the wider points that he has raised and I am happy to discuss them with him.

In short, my hon. Friend has set out that the Isle of Wight is ideally placed to be at the vanguard of the NHS’s approach as we move forward with the 10-year forward view, in embracing digital and integration and in looking at how to deliver place-based commissioning most effectively. There are some specific challenges with regard to its population and its geography in terms of travel. The interplay of those two things is another challenge in terms of efficiencies of scale and the services that are considered essential on the Island, which may be dealt with at a larger-population level elsewhere.

In the NHS more widely, as we move to a hub-and-spoke model and to more flexible population sizes, and as we look at place-based commissioning, the Isle of Wight has huge potential to be at the forefront, as my hon. Friend has set out. I am very happy to follow up this debate by meeting my hon. Friend, and to facilitate a discussion between him and NHS England, to ensure that we deliver what he has campaigned passionately for—the best healthcare for residents of the Island—and that the significant investment set out by the Prime Minister is maximised for his constituents.

The shadow Minister quite reasonably asked whether we were open to changes to the legislation. As he will be aware, the Prime Minister said to the NHS leadership in her remarks at the Royal Free Hospital that we are open to such suggestions if NHS leaders feel that changes are necessary. As part of the workings of the long-term plan, those leaders will need to look at what they need, and whether much of the integration—I know that the Mayor of Manchester supports the integration that is taking place in Manchester—can be done under existing legislation, or whether changes are needed, and if so, what those are. That will be part of the discussions with Simon Stevens and others in the weeks and months ahead.

*David Hanson (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Isle of Wight has the opportunity to make any concluding comments, should he so wish.*

10.20 am

*Mr Seely: Only to thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and the Minister, the shadow Minister, and the officials for attending. Thank you so much.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

That this House has considered the provision of healthcare on English islands.

10.21 am

*Sitting suspended.*

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**Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games: Shooting**

11 am

*Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I beg to move.*

That this House has considered the removal of shooting sports from Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I would like to push forward with the efforts started by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I am pleased to see him present—to make the case for the reinstatement of shooting sports at the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham. I have picked up many of the points raised during his Adjournment debate, and I will expand on them in the wake of the home nations’ phenomenal performance at the Gold Coast Commonwealth games this year.

The decision not to include shooting in the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham has left many in the UK, particularly in my constituency, confused and unhappy. The matter is of particular importance to a constituent of mine, David McMath, a 21-year-old young man who recently won gold in the men’s double trap competition at the games this year. He set a games record with a total of 74—four ahead of his nearest rival, Tim Kneale from the Isle of Man, who took silver.

Without a doubt, shooting is a source of extreme national pride for the home nations of the United Kingdom, as it is one of our strongest sports. In fact, we are the second strongest group in shooting events and managed to collect 38% of the medals on offer this year. Not adding shooting to the 2022 games has taken away 57 medal opportunities. Every one of the home nations and Channel Islands participated in the shooting events, which proves the sport’s popularity. In fact, it was the only sport for which the Isle of Man won a medal this year. Given that England came second in the medals table for the past three games, it seems odd and counterproductive that shooting has been removed from the programme.

The Birmingham organisers cited venue issues as the reason not to include shooting in 2022, stating that the only suitable venue would be Bisley, which, at 130 miles from Birmingham, is too far away.

*Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene so early in his speech. The notion that Bisley is too far away is simply nonsensical. It was upgraded for the Commonwealth games a number of years ago and is a perfect, ready-made venue for these events. In addition to the fact that we have lots of medal opportunities in shooting, it is a totally egalitarian sport. People with disabilities, and people of different genders and abilities can compete on the same basis; there is no better sport to demonstrate that.*

*Mr Jack: My hon. Friend makes a number of excellent points and he will be pleased to know that I will cover them all. As I have said, the organisers said that Bisley, at 130 miles from Birmingham, is too far away. They also claimed that it would be too expensive to renovate Bisley. That argument has little merit when we consider that they decided to use the London velodrome track for cycling, which is 135 miles away.*
[Mr Jack]

As my hon. Friend has said, Bisley shooting ground was deemed adequate for the Commonwealth games held in Manchester in 2002. Manchester is significantly further north than Birmingham, at a total of 215 miles from Bisley.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a topic that we are all interested in. The fact that more of those who participated in the Adjournment debate are not here does not mean it is any less of a concern today. Does he agree that the removal of shooting sports from the Birmingham games appears to have more to do with misconceptions about the sport than with a lack of facilities? Will he join me in sincerely urging the Minister to use her influence—I know she is keen to do so—to incorporate this very popular and successful sport into the schedule before it is too late?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman makes very good points and I agree with him.

Manchester used Bisley in 2002, although it is 215 miles from the shooting ground. I therefore argue that it can be done and that Bisley can provide the required facilities. I concede that Bisley is not in tip-top condition, but the venue remains fully operational and would require only light modernisation to bring it up to scratch. With 95% of the competition venues already in place, minor refurbishment of the Bisley shooting ground would not add an unfeasible workload to the games organisers.

A second solution is to build a new site alongside the new national shooting centre for which UK Sport and British Shooting are currently securing funding and planning permission. If the organisers of the Birmingham games were to link funding to the national governing body, it would be a fantastic opportunity to ensure that the games leave a lasting legacy.

Shooting is currently on a list of optional sports, from which the host city must choose seven. The organisers of Birmingham 2022 have opted to include table tennis, for which England has only ever won 15 medals. That pales in comparison with the 168 medals won for shooting. They have also opted for 3x3 basketball, which is a novelty in the Commonwealth games. I think shooting is a more important sport.

Given that I have just presented a counter-argument and an alternative option to the venue issue cited by the Birmingham organisers, I see no logical reason why England would want to cheat herself of a significant number of medals by removing shooting from the agenda.

Shooting has been on the Commonwealth games agenda at every games bar 1970. It was originally introduced in 1966 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) has said, it is one of the most diverse and inclusive sports on offer. Two of the 13 shooting events—the fullbore rifle competitions—are open to men and women. They are the only competitions at the Commonwealth games in which men and women compete equally on an open field. The sport gets people of all backgrounds out and competing. Competitors do not have to be incredibly fit to be active in the sport, which means that people can compete in it for longer. At this year’s games on the Gold Coast, Scotland had two medallists, a man and a woman, aged 21, and two medallists, also a man and a woman, over the age of 50. There was even a competitor from Canada who was in his 80s.

In the spirit of inclusivity, it is worth mentioning that, for many of the small Commonwealth nations, such as Cyprus, Malta, the Falkland Islands, Niue, Norfolk Island and Papa New Guinea, shooting is a dominant sport. Without shooting, some of those nations would not be able to send teams to the games at all. Norfolk Island only sent shooters and bowlers to the 2018 Gold Cost games, and the Turks and Caicos Islands only sent teams for shooting and athletics. To remove shooting from the games would possibly be to deny those small nations access to the competition altogether.

This debate has taken on an international flavour, as I have been contacted by the Crown Prince of Patiala, India, His Highness Raninder Singh, who is also president of the National Rifle Association of India. He stresses how important it is for his country to be involved. I have also had support from Lord Bilimoria, who is in Kenya and has similar strong feelings.

Let me also highlight the impact that this decision would have on India’s medal standing. India is the largest member state, and shooting sports contributed to 24% of the medals she won at the Gold Coast Commonwealth games. At the previous games in Glasgow, 23% of her medals came from shooting sports. Not to include shooting sports in Birmingham will deny India the ability to maximise and showcase her shooting athletes’ skills, which have enabled them to secure the No. 1 position in shooting in the past two games.

Birmingham was only recently announced as the host of the 2022 games. Although I am obviously pleased for the city, it should be noted that the original host, Durban, had confirmed that shooting would be on the agenda. The sudden removal of the sport will deprive the home nations not only of the chance to excel on the medal table but of the opportunity to test their skills on an international stage before the Olympic games in 2024.

The support for the shooting competitions only increases with each games. That is highlighted by 38 of 72 nations competing in the sport at this year’s Gold Coast games. Additionally, the Shooting Times recently launched a petition to get shooting back on the agenda for 2022. In just four months it has already been signed by more than 60,000 people. To include shooting sports in 2022 will have the threefold effect of boosting the home nations’ performances in the medal table, offering a more diverse and inclusive competition, and creating a forum for the numerous shooting athletes who use the Commonwealth games as a stepping stone to the Olympics.

Therefore, for the reasons I have outlined, I urge the organisers of the Birmingham Commonwealth games to reconsider their decision and to reinstate shooting on the agenda.

11.10 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for leading today’s debate, which
follows the recent Adjournment debate tabled by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for his intervention. He contributed to the Adjournment debate, and he made a powerful point about the egalitarian nature of the sport.

This is clearly a matter that invokes much passion and is of personal interest to a number of Members across the whole House and their constituents. I am happy to confirm right at the outset that both the Secretary of State and I support the request for the Birmingham games to include shooting, but I should explain our limitations as Ministers of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the other challenges that need to be overcome.

First, let us remind ourselves of the phenomenal success of shooting at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games, hosted at the Royal Artillery barracks. The tears of joy of double trap gold medallist Peter Wilson were a lasting image of the emotion felt by dedicated athletes at the top of their sport. His success was followed by incredible performances at the Gold Coast Commonwealth games by our home nation athletes. They returned from Australia with an impressive 21 medals—22 including the medal won for the Isle of Man. The athletes included David McMath, who won gold in the double trap and, as has been mentioned, is a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway. I am sure that Members will join me in recognising and applauding the efforts of our athletes on the international sporting stage. It is a testament to the efforts of these athletes, and to the wider high-performance sporting framework in the UK, that British athletes continue to produce medal-winning performances that inspire us all.

Being the next host city for the Commonwealth games will bring a huge number of positive opportunities to the city of Birmingham, the wider west midlands and the UK as a whole. They will showcase to the world the best of Britain as a destination for international trade, provide new economic growth and social benefits and maximise legacy opportunities for the west midlands. Government have been working closely with their partners Birmingham City Council, Commonwealth Games England, West Midlands Combined Authority and the Commonwealth Games Federation to begin preparations. The process to set up the board of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games organising committee is well under way.

Hosting the games is a significant undertaking that, despite presenting enormous opportunities for Birmingham and the UK, must be done within the requirements of the Commonwealth Games Federation and in a pragmatic way. As custodians of public funds, we must recognise that any changes to the sport programme agreed by games partners will have a financial implication. It is our duty to ensure that the event is delivered in a cost-effective way. As my hon. Friend and hon. Members who contributed to the Adjournment debate will be aware, the host city is bound by regulations that prescribe the delivery of 16 core sports. Contrary to what my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, table tennis is a core sport, not an optional sport. In addition, the host city is able to select a small number of sports from the optional list, of which shooting is one.

Shooting is one of the top five most popular sports among participating Commonwealth nations and territories. At Glasgow 2014, more than 350 athletes represented 39 nations and territories. At Gold Coast 2018, 281 athletes from 38 nations and territories took part in the shooting disciplines. I am conscious of my hon. Friend’s point that large Commonwealth countries such as India participate in shooting, but so do very small nations, who contribute a great deal. The list of nations and territories that participated in Glasgow and in Gold Coast include Norfolk Island and Niue, which my hon. Friend mentioned. I am trying to work out whether they are the two smallest; Norfolk Island has a population of about 1,700 people, yet it had eight athletes competing in the shooting discipline at the Gold Coast Commonwealth games.

When selecting optional sports, the games partners should take into account the delivery of a diverse sport programme that will appeal to spectators domestically and abroad; hosting a sport programme that features gender equity and appropriate para-sport inclusion; sport operational staging costs; and the existence of suitable, well-located venues.

Although I hear what my hon. Friend says about Bisley and the London velodrome being equidistant, by the time the games take place, the Bisley venue will be nearly 20 years old. Advancements in the sport and the scale of the events in shooting dictate that the upgrade would incur significant costs. Satellite accommodation would also be required. I understand his point about the geographical aspect, that it is not necessarily the argument in this case—but there is a cost incurred. He and the hon. Member for Strangford, who are passionate about shooting, will, I am sure, appreciate that if we are to host a shooting event, we must have the best venue, to attract the world’s best shooters.

Mr Jack: The Minister says that Bisley is 20 years old; it has been 20 years since its last refurbishment, but it is much older than that. As a teenager, I shot at Bisley, so I can assure the Minister it is a lot older. It is not a significant cost to bring it up to standard. Could the Minister speak to the games organisers, to put some form of costing in place and to assess generally how expensive it would be to go to Bisley? My understanding is that there is not much to do.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s clarification, but it is not just about the cost; it could also be about the accommodation. We are looking at the issue and, as I said at the outset, the Secretary of State and I both support the inclusion of shooting, but as core partners in the delivery of the Commonwealth games, we must ensure we deliver a cost-effective games. These are not necessarily challenges that we cannot overcome, but they are challenges.

Jim Shannon: Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in the Minister’s response. Bisley is a world-renowned championship venue for many events. The skeletal frame is in place, but if some edges need to be sharpened—if accommodation needs to be arranged and some other small things need to be done—that is not necessarily impossible. It is an acceptable venue, and a wee bit more effort would make it conform to all requirements. Surely we should do our best to make that happen.
Tracey Crouch: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman or with my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, but there are logistical and cost challenges. They are not necessarily ones that we cannot overcome, and both Members are right to place their points on the record, to ensure that anyone reading this debate, particularly from the Commonwealth Games Federation, understands that there is a real desire to support everybody in overcoming the challenges.

Mr Jack: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. The point about the accommodation could be a spurious argument from the games organisers, because the athletes competing in the other sports that replace shooting will still need accommodation. Whether that is near Bisley or Birmingham, there is still a cost. There may be an opportunity cost, but it is not a saving in real terms.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We can further discuss the assumptions in his point after the debate.

In selecting optional sports, the games partners have to take into account the four considerations I just outlined, while complying with the athlete and team official quota restrictions set by the Commonwealth Games Federation, which is one of the assumptions my hon. Friend alluded to. The games partners have developed a sport programme that includes 3x3 basketball and 3x3 para-basketball, track cycling and para-track cycling, mountain biking, diving, rhythmic gymnastics and para-triathlon.

I will have to disagree slightly with my hon. Friend about the value of some of those optional sports, which are popular within particular communities that we are trying to engage in sport. In looking at an overall sporting programme, we must ensure that we are inspiring a large number of people across all sectors of society.

More than 2 million people in the UK regularly participate in the sports I just listed, and the home nations collected 37 medals from those events on the Gold Coast.

I do, however, understand my hon. Friend’s concerns, and I sympathise with his position. Shooting’s popularity across the Commonwealth nations and territories, from the largest nation to the smallest, is enormous, and the home nations have had a particularly strong track record at previous games.

In recognition of that and of the value that shooting brings to the games, the Secretary of State and I are exploring with games partners the potential for including shooting in the sport programme. However, I stress that that decision is beyond our remit, and we have an enormous challenge, in that Birmingham was awarded the games with just 4.5 years to deliver, rather than the usual seven years. While I have no doubt that the city will deliver an outstanding event, despite that timeframe, a number of practical considerations must be taken into account to ensure that the games are delivered successfully.

While planning for the games continues, we continue to invest in shooting and its athletes’ medal-winning aspirations. Colleagues will be pleased to hear that UK Sport is providing £6.9 million of funding for the Tokyo 2020 shooting performance cycle and £2.5 million for para-shooting.

The Government support the notion of shooting being included, and will work with partners to overcome logistical challenges, if required. We will continue to work with games partners. In the meantime, I am sure my hon. Friend and others will join me in supporting all those involved to ensure the delivery of a fantastic Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.
Scottish Economy

[Mrs Anne Main in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Scottish economy.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to bring such an important and timely debate to the House. I am pleased to see so many colleagues here, although I am disappointed that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is the only Government Minister who could join us. I know the Government take a rather apathetic view of devolution these days—[Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Let the hon. Member continue.

Ged Killen: I must point out that this is a debate about the Scottish economy, so I am not sure whether the presence of the Minister, albeit welcome, is an indication of diary conflicts, or that we are all the same in the eyes of the UK Government. It would have been nice to see someone from the Scotland Office or perhaps a Treasury Minister here to answer the debate.

It has been 10 years since the financial crisis, and in an ideal world we would be looking back on the crisis from a renewed position of strength, with the fundamentals of our economy strong, and with optimism for the future. Sadly, that is not where we find ourselves. Following a decade of economic mismanagement of Scotland by the Scottish National party and Conservative Governments, Scotland’s economy has failed to recover to above pre-crisis levels in a number of areas. The fundamentals of the economy are structurally unsound, with built-in constraints on future growth, and we appear to be trapped between two economic futures: one a Tory hard Brexit, the other supercharged austerity under the SNP’s growth commission.

The Scottish people have lost a decade of economic growth. Under the projections of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, that lost decade threatens to turn into a generation. However, I remain optimistic, because there is a third way: a Labour vision for the economy—an economy driven by investment, not cuts, and a vision that has an optimistic outlook for the Scottish economy, rather than one of managed decline. Today, I will set out where the Scottish economy stands; the two visions before us as posed by the UK and Scottish Governments; and the third way offered by the Labour party.

Ten years on from the financial crisis, the Scottish economy is in a difficult position. Economic growth remains heavily stagnant. GDP growth in Scotland has averaged out at less than 1% per year since the financial crisis, while the rest of the UK has done only slightly better. Unfortunately, things are not expected to get much better, because the Scottish Fiscal Commission does not expect growth to rise above 1% until after at least 2023. If that is the case, Scotland’s economy will not just have been at a standstill for a decade, but will have remained in the freezer for a generation.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the consequence of this slow growth in our economy is that an estimated £1.7 billion projected to be raised in tax will not be raised at all, and that we will have a deficit in the revenue that is expected to fund the public services we all depend on?

Ged Killen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. We have a serious issue with how we expect to finance public spending in Scotland, and I will come on to that later.

Unfortunately, the story is the same when we turn to productivity. While the productivity puzzle on these islands has been a problem for both Scotland and the rest of the UK, the most recent figures show that in Scotland the puzzle is even more complex, and while UK productivity has risen by 0.7%, trend productivity in Scotland is zero. On key indicators for growing our economy and making our workers more productive, the SNP Government have an even poorer track record than the UK Government. That means that the country is not reaching its full potential, and the average person’s wages are being squeezed more and more. In the real world, in terms of how far forwards the end of the month people’s pay reaches, when it comes to buying food, paying bills and socialising, the average Scot is worse off now than they were 10 years ago and is doing worse than the UK average.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes a point about take-home pay and how much workers have in their pay packets, but when the SNP and Scottish Parliament announced their “Nat Tax”, his Labour colleagues in the Scottish Parliament argued that it did not go high enough. They wanted to take greater taxes off the hard-working Scots. How can he complain about how much people are taking home in their pay packets, when he wants to increase tax and take more money out of those pay packets?

Ged Killen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments; I know we have very different views on tax and spend, and I do not think we will resolve them here.

To add to all that, Scotland is more unequal than ever. The wealth disparity means that the average household would need to save every penny of their income for 43 years to enter the top 10% of wealthiest Scots. A failure to increase wages, build more houses or spread wealth means that the most significant factor in determining whether a person will own their own home or secure a top-tier job is not their skills and talents, but who their parents are and where they live. A Scotland where circumstances of birth will take people further than their skills and talents is not the kind of country we should aspire to be, but that is the situation we find ourselves in.

Despite those facts, the vision put forward by our governing parties is not for the radical transformation that is clearly needed. On one side, one of Scotland’s Governments supports a damaging Brexit policy that will cut the ties of Scotland and the rest of the UK to the EU’s internal markets and the customs union. The Fraser of Allander Institute has modelled that with each degree of separation from those two tenets of the EU, Scotland will be more and more damaged. Scotland faces being between 2% and 5% worse off in GDP terms...
as a result of this Tory Brexit, while in the worst of cases, under a no-deal Brexit, in which we default to World Trade Organisation rules, wage growth will go into reverse, the economy will shrink and, most worryingly, Scotland’s successful food and drinks exporting industry could suffer as much as a 26% reduction in trade.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Can the hon. Gentleman explain how the position of his party’s Front Benchers on Brexit is any different from that of the Conservative Government?

Ged Killen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments; he is obviously not paying very close attention in the Chamber. The UK Governments have very clear red lines drawn all over the place, and none of them seem to reach any kind of consensus. [Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I know the hon. Gentleman’s remarks are provoking comments, but please can those comments be kept to either interventions or speeches?

Ged Killen: Thank you, Mrs Main. The Labour party position is quite clearly putting jobs and the economy first. If the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) intends to contribute to this debate, perhaps he can explain why it is very important for Scotland’s economy to remain in the European Union but his party wants to take us out of the United Kingdom. That is something I would find difficult to square.

The UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute have all warned of serious damage to Scotland’s economy as the result of a no-deal Brexit. Worryingly, recently it has seemed that some members of the Conservative party believe that that is an acceptable outcome. In no circumstances should any public representative be recommending that that risk be taken in pursuit of gains that, in my view, are vastly outweighed by the negatives.

On the other side of the equation we have the SNP Government, who have produced a growth commission to set out how they want to see Scotland’s economy grow in the future. In 2015 and 2017, the SNP stood on a manifesto that claimed that it was anti-austerity. The publication of the growth commission and the endorsement of its policies by the First Minister should represent the party of austerity that we know it to be.

In the growth commission, the Scottish Government propose reducing Scotland’s budget deficit through an approach that would see spending on public services and benefits fall by about 4% of GDP over a decade. Compare that with the policies of the Conservative UK Government, as set out by the Office for Budget Responsibility. The UK Government’s projections see spending on public services and benefits over a five-year period, from 2018-19 to 2022-23, falling by 0.9% of GDP. The plans set out by the SNP in the growth commission would mean the Scottish Government cutting public expenditure on public services and benefits close to five times faster than this Conservative UK Government.

In its model for the future of an independent Scottish economy, the SNP has given up on monetary policy as a tool for stimulating the economy. By not proposing a new currency and by setting public spending and borrowing targets that even George Osborne would have considered ambitious, the SNP has baked serious public spending cuts into its preferred future economic model. Relying on fiscal policy alone to reduce Government debt and budget deficits, they will have to introduce spending cuts, raise taxes or do a combination of both. That is the dictionary definition of austerity.

Those are the most optimistic of figures. The IFS says that, with an ageing population adding to the pressures on the health, social care and state pension budgets, keeping to the growth commission’s targets would likely require cuts to many public services, with the commission not taking the time to spell out exactly where the axe would fall and who would lose out as a consequence. Furthermore, the IFS also said what all know to be true:

“It is also inconsistent to claim that these plans do not amount to austerity but the UK government’s current policy does”, particularly while the growth commission’s plans “imply slightly slower real growth in spending than the UK Government is currently implementing.”

I am sure that the SNP will not cease to call itself the anti-austerity party, even after the growth commission’s publication. However, the facts speak for themselves. These are empty calls and stolen clothing. The growth commission is most disappointing because of its lack of ambition. The two Governments of Scotland have produced plans for the future of the Scottish economy that leave much to be desired, and it is therefore up to the Labour party to present a true alternative.

The Scottish economy has three core structural problems: stagnant GDP growth, low productivity and demographic challenges caused by a projected significant increase in the over-65 population and a shrinking in the relative size of the economically active population. Labour has a vision to address all these problems. The problems of growth and productivity cannot be separated; they are twin problems. The Scottish labour market is strong—we have a relatively low unemployment rate by European standards, and an exceptionally low youth unemployment rate.

However, while unemployment has decreased over the years, wages have stagnated and economic output has not matched the increase in the labour force that would usually be expected. That is because, while jobs have been created, they are predominantly low-skill, low-wage jobs that have not helped to accelerate growth; nor have they been productive enough to increase wages. By introducing a minimum wage of £10 per hour, we can reverse the trend of low wages and encourage investment to improve labour productivity. If we increase the minimum wage, companies will have to invest in technology and training to improve the output of their workforce to match the demands they are under. No longer will low-wage, gig economy jobs serve to undercut the advantages of investment.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman talks about raising the minimum wage, which is a laudable aim for us all to strive for. However, we are talking about Scotland’s economy, and he will of course realise that this area of
economic policy is reserved to the UK Government, so this is not in the gift of the Scottish Government to enforce.

Ged Killen: The hon. Gentleman will of course realise that we are in the UK Parliament. Scotland has two Governments, and I am talking about Labour’s vision for both. [Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Mr Gray, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) has taken your intervention. Please do not carry on your conversation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman support the devolution of employment law?

Ged Killen: Perhaps the hon. Lady will tell us in her remarks how her party intends to change employment law, if it is devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Scotland suffers from under-investment. While the Scottish Government have produced many investment packages, they are often too small, too numerous and too unfocused to deliver the outcomes they are set up to achieve. Those are not my words but the conclusions of recent reports by the Fraser of Allander Institute and the Scottish Parliament’s Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee.

Under the current Scottish Government, we have had economic development plans governed by press release. Labour proposes real investment to correct the problems of stagnant labour productivity and GDP growth. We aim to stimulate investment more widely through a national plan that focuses long-term investment on local and national infrastructure, such as information, communication, services and production technologies, as well as in physical infrastructure, such as roads, buildings and town and city centres. That will not only correct the decade of under-investment that led to the productivity problem, but begin the vital future-proofing of the Scottish workforce against the challenges of automation and increasing digitalisation.

Furthermore, we plan to examine the possibility of public sector pension funds using their resources to establish a Scottish public provident fund, which could invest in local production and infrastructure, boost local supply chains and stimulate employment.

We will implement our industrial strategy and invest in Scotland’s economy. We will also encourage and incentivise firms in Scotland to raise the percentage of their manufactured output.

CST Global has shown itself to be a significantly high-growth, high-skill business. It has sustained strong annual growth, with revenues increasing by 58% in a year to £6.7 million in 2017. It is a strong exporter, and the photonics industry is one of the UK’s most productive. On average, each employee in the sector contributes £62,000 to the economy in gross value per year—three times the UK average. These companies also have some of the highest export rates of any industry, exporting an average of 75% of their manufactured output.

Such companies are often city-based, and we would not typically expect them to be found in smaller towns, such as Blantyre in my constituency. However, CST Global has proven that that need not be the case; when conditions are right, those companies can not only do well but thrive in these places. CST Global is very welcome in Blantyre. Supporting such businesses is central to the investment-based economic model. If we want to see the future of the Scottish economy defined by high-skill, high-wage and high-tech jobs, we have to invest.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): If the hon. Gentleman is genuinely interested in growing the Scottish economy, he should support the devolution of powers to set VAT and national insurance rates, and to collect fuel duties, capital gains tax, interest on dividends and export duties, as well as all the other powers that the Scottish Parliament does not possess and is therefore unable to use to grow our economy.

Ged Killen: It is nice to see that both the hon. Lady and her favourite pantomime villains have turned up to continue the set-to that we often see in the Chamber. I am here to make a speech on what I believe is right for the Scottish economy. She will clearly disagree on several matters, and she can set those out in her remarks. As always for SNP Members, independence is the answer, no matter the question. I am surprised to hear SNP Members now talk about devolution so much, given that they have always opposed it. [Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. This is becoming somewhat intolerable. No respect is being shown to the hon. Gentleman, who is trying to make his speech. This is not a conversation among Members; it is a debate, which will be held in the proper manner. I ask all colleagues to respect the hon. Members making speeches and to keep their remarks to themselves or to voice them in the proper manner—through interventions.

Ged Killen: Thank you, Mrs Main. While we invest in a productive workforce, we must also attract talent to fill those spaces. All of Scotland’s population growth from 2016 to 2041 will derive from inward migration, as deaths will outnumber births in each year. Brexit therefore presents a risk, as it could reduce inward migration from the EU. However, even without Brexit, population growth is too slow and lags behind that of other parts of the UK, both in terms of birth and death rates, and through inward migration. We can correct that by supporting a needs-based immigration system. It is simply unhelpful to focus on an abstract number, as the UK Government are doing—or are failing to do.

However, we must also build the communities that attract the best talent. That is why we have called on the Scottish and UK Governments to get on with the completion of the city deals projects. People move to cities and communities. The delivery of more than £1 billion of funding and the devolution of further powers will allow our cities and communities to make themselves attractive to international talent on their own terms, rather than having terms dictated by Holyrood or Westminster.
Overall, 83% of Scotland’s population—4.5 million people—live in areas covered by existing or planned city region deals. That is a huge amount of talent and aspiration to be unlocked, and we simply cannot wait any longer. However, those deals have been bogged down as both the Scottish and UK Governments cannot bring themselves together to settle the matter. We have seen in the wrangling over the devolution settlement that the SNP and Conservative party can lock themselves in disagreement if it is politically opportune to do so; dare I say that we have seen that today? However, the people of Scotland should not be punished because of the narrow interests of the two governing parties.

In conclusion, Scotland has lost a decade of economic progress under its two Governments. If nothing changes, this decade threatens to turn into a generation of stagnation. However, an opportunity exists to turn this around, and the pathway to growth is best fulfilled by an investment-based economic model.

Under the guidance of the SNP, the Scottish economy has grown at half the UK rate. It has failed to meet its targets to match the UK GDP growth rate and succeeded only in overseeing the slowest growth rate of any country in the EU.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that the responsibility for the growth of all the nations of the UK sits firmly with him?

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your direction, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing this important debate on a matter that is close to my and many of my colleagues’ hearts.

I will begin by looking at some of the statistical indicators for Scotland’s current economic performance, starting with GDP. Scotland’s GDP was 1.7% in 2015; it plummeted to 0.2% in 2016 and rose marginally, to 0.4%, in 2017. In comparison, UK GDP was 2.3% in 2015, 1.9% in 2016 and 1.8% in 2017. The employment rate in Scotland in the first three months of 2018 was 75.2%, compared with a UK rate of 75.6%. The unemployment rate in Scotland was 4.3%, slightly higher than the UK rate of 4.2%, over the same period.

**Deidre Brock** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that the responsibility for the growth of all the nations of the UK sits firmly with him?

**Luke Graham**: That is why we are having a debate in this place—because growth is the responsibility of the United Kingdom. The problem is the claims of the SNP Administration that they champion economic growth in Scotland. Scottish Enterprise is devolved. Much of the tourism is devolved. The scream for powers has meant that so many levers have been denied to this place and put into Edinburgh. Although I agree that accountability—[Interruption.] If you want to make an intervention, stand up and make one, madam.

**Deidre Brock**: I will.

**Luke Graham**: Come on then.

**Deidre Brock**: I am just going to repeat what I said before: the setting of VAT rates, national insurance, fuel duties, capital gains tax are not devolved to the Scottish Parliament and therefore can have no impact on the economic powers that the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

**Luke Graham**: The hon. Lady repeats the point, and it is as weak as it was the first time.

The Scottish economy is not forecast to grow by more than 1% at any stage over the next five years. As a result, the Scottish economy will be more than £18 billion smaller by 2022. It is not helped one iota by any devolved power, whereas in this place we have been trying to help the Scottish economy.

**Stephen Kerr**: Does my hon. Friend agree with the conclusion of the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which includes, I think, four or five SNP Members? It states:

“If we are to reverse this trend then the Scottish Government must use all of the levers at its disposal to bring a sharper focus on growing the economy, and ensuring that growth is inclusive.”

That is something they are failing to do currently.

**Luke Graham**: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I could not agree more. One point on which I do agree with the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West is that Scotland has two levels of government—one in Edinburgh and one in Westminster—and they should work together productively to try to improve Scotland’s economic performance, which lags behind that of the UK. As a Member who has just negotiated a city deal for his region, I can say honestly, hand on heart, that the two levels of government are not working well together. The relationship is dysfunctional; it does not work. Powers are being hoarded in Edinburgh and not given down to the local authorities, as they should be.
Productivity is lower than it was in 2010 and the gap between Scottish and UK productivity is wider than it was in 2009. Scotland has the lowest rate of business growth in the UK and is forced to pay the highest business rates in Europe. In addition, the SNP broke a major manifesto promise and raised tax on more than 1 million Scots earning over £26,000, ensuring that Scotland’s wealth creators have less of their wealth to create more through further investment.

We talk about powers a lot in this place; the issue dominates a lot of our debate, but let us be clear. The only power given back was that to vary income tax by 1p, and it was given back to Westminster by the SNP, having originally been devolved under the Scotland Act 1998. The Conservatives do not give away powers; the SNP does. [Interruption.] Between 2010 and 2016, Scotland’s economic growth rate was 1.7%, compared with—[Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) must control herself. She is not down to speak, but she can speak if she wishes to rise. Will she please limit her remarks to either interventions or a speech, instead of barracking?

Luke Graham: Scotland’s economic growth rate was 1.7%, compared with 1.9% for the UK, and that was even before Brexit, showing that Scotland’s economy consistently performs worse than that of the United Kingdom.

Last year the SNP Administration set up the Scottish growth scheme—a £500 million fund designed “to help businesses thrive and grow”. They have spent only £25 million of that fund. Similarly, they have failed to spend a single penny of the £36 million digital growth fund since it was announced in March 2017. Meanwhile, last Thursday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, Derek Mackay, announced that there was a £453 million underspend by the SNP Administration in the last financial year. It is the fourth year in a row that the SNP Administration have underspent their budget. In total, it is more than £1.2 billion that they have chosen to deprive the Scottish economy of since 2014. That is unacceptable.

Meanwhile, my local councils in Clackmannanshire and Perth and Kinross are forced to increase council tax and cut services for our local residents. That means cuts to music tuition, public transport and the upkeep of our paths and roads. It is unacceptable and it cannot go on.

This is not about Brexit. It is about the deliberately dysfunctional devolution overseen by the Scottish National party. The SNP is failing our constituents through its woeful mismanagement of the Scottish economy and its refusal to invest the money that we already have and the money that comes from this place, which should be going directly to our constituents. If they do not want to use the levers of administration to improve the Scottish economy, perhaps it is time to stand aside for the Conservative and Unionist Opposition, who certainly will.

A key component missing from the plan for the future of Scotland’s economy is an appropriate and robust industrial strategy, on which I will focus my remarks. Neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government have a coherent strategy for industry in Scotland. As a result, Scotland’s economy is declining. Economic growth has slowed to well below its historical average. It was 0.2% during the first quarter of 2018, according to figures released today. Real wages are lower today than they were in 2010, and closures continue.

One of the areas where the lack of an industrial strategy is clearest is the construction sector. Crummock, a construction firm in my constituency of Midlothian, recently collapsed and its closure led to the direct loss of almost 300 jobs.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the industrial strategy that Scotland requires needs a strong, well-functioning and delivering education system? Over the past decade, Scotland’s education system has been undermined to the extent that one in five children now leave school functionally illiterate.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I absolutely agree that education is a fundamental part of growing industry in Scotland.

The collapse of Crummock in my constituency is just the latest example of the deep problems surrounding the financial health and stability of the Scottish construction industry.

John Lamont: The hon. Lady is speaking very well about the economic challenges that Scotland faces. Does she agree that those challenges would be turned into complete misery for the people of Scotland if the SNP had its way and ripped Scotland out of the United Kingdom?

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He will know that I would agree with that.

To focus on the construction industry, the collapse of Crummock is just one of many that we have seen recently, with many job losses, in Scotland. The closure of large employers such as Crummock will have a significant impact on local economies. A number of suppliers and service providers have spoken to me about their worries. A small electrical company and those providing cleaning services have expressed to me concerns about the future of their businesses following Crummock’s closure. Such closures reflect the failure of an economic strategy that is over-reliant on free-market forces, as well as an absence of joined-up Government policy and action, especially in public procurement.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): You mentioned the lack of free-market forces. Do you agree with your shadow Chancellor when he says that he wants to overthrow capitalism and bring down Britain’s system of free enterprise? That would mean fewer jobs, less money for public services and untold damage to the Scottish economy. Do you agree with his position?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Please speak through the Chair. I do not agree with any of that. Ask the hon. Lady if she agrees with that.
Danielle Rowley: Thank you, Mrs Main. I think that overthrowing capitalism is a matter bigger than this debate. Perhaps we can debate it some other time.

Crummock’s recent accounts noted that the absence of public sector contracts was the biggest risk to the firm’s future. That includes Scottish Government contracts and local authority contracts, which have been declining as local government budgets are slashed. That suggests the need for an investigation into how public institutions can best use the resources available and better support the construction sector and the wider industry in Scotland. It also suggests that the decline in council revenue funding overseen by the Scottish Government, which has fallen in real terms by 9.6% since 2010, is having a severe impact on Scotland’s local economies.

By contrast, Scottish Labour plans to invest in Scotland’s economy. Labour policy would see £70 billion of investment in industry in Scotland. We would create a national investment bank that would see £20 billion of capital structured in Scotland for industrial strategy and investment. That is the scale of investment required to get the sector to where it needs to be. We need to be investing to the tune of billions of pounds, not just the millions of pounds put forward by the SNP.

Closures in the construction industry have further highlighted the vital need to proactively plan for the sustainable development of our industrial base. Rather than simply reacting to market failure, we must plan ahead. As part of that, the Scottish Government need to properly investigate why well-established Scottish construction companies are collapsing.

The focus of that investigation should include any changes to the way in which banks finance companies. We need to look at why it is taking so long for subcontractors to be paid by client companies, which is another huge issue raised with me. The investigation must also look at office-based workers and administration staff who are affected by construction sector closures. The construction industry already displays the largest gender pay gap. Once again, female workers are disproportionately and adversely affected by the collapse of construction companies.

Another area where there is a clear need for a coherent strategy to support our economy is our struggling high streets. We need to mitigate the effects of RBS bank closures and post office closures. The Secretary of State for Scotland needs to work with the Scottish Government to develop an appropriate industrial strategy for Scotland. Both Governments must work with our local councils and properly fund them, so that our local economies can be supported.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The wind-ups will start at 3.30 pm. I hope not to impose a time limit on speeches. If all hon. Members confine their remarks to about five minutes or less, we will not need one.

3.30 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my colleague on the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), on securing this important debate.

East Renfrewshire is home to the thriving small businesses and micro-enterprises that power the British economy while also providing investment and employment for the local community. It is these companies that help make Britain one of the largest economies in the world, which helps provide our vital public services. We have more established names, such as Barrhead Travel and A. C. Whyte, which are based in East Renfrewshire but are world leaders in their sector, as well as dynamic, newer enterprises, such as JKM Murdoch & Son, which was recently recognised in the 2018 London Stock Exchange report, “1000 Companies to Inspire”. The Scottish and UK Governments must prioritise and support those companies and many thousands like them, if we are to encourage investment and continue to grow our sluggish economy.

For too long, however, a high oil price has hidden Scotland’s economic underperformance, allowing Scottish Governments of both colours to neglect fixing the Scottish economy’s fundamentals. Most recently, the Scottish Parliament’s own highly respected Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee unanimously agreed a report that stated that in Scotland, “levels of GDP growth are marginal, productivity low and wages stagnant”.

Scotland’s major problem, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West has highlighted, is its productivity, which is at a lower level than it was in 2010. The gap between UK and Scottish productivity is larger than it was in 2009.

The Scottish Government do deserve some credit for setting up the new Scottish national investment bank. Ultimately, however, it was a rehashed announcement of something that has already supposedly been launched multiple times by this tired, separatist Government. If it does come to fruition, it will be a positive step for the Scottish economy, but we will have to wait and see what happens.

Last year, the Scottish economy grew at less than half the rate of the UK and slower than every single EU country. Future predictions are not particularly positive. The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that Scotland will fail to match wider UK economic growth for the next five years. That is really important, because it means less money for the Scottish NHS, Scottish schools and other Scottish public services. It means less money in the pockets of those struggling to get by and businesses taking on fewer staff. It means less money circulating in the local economy, something which contributes to the picture of high streets across Scotland, where local businesses simply cannot continue.

Let us not forget that behind the economic data, this is a real story for people throughout Scotland. Entrepreneurs are risk takers, innovators and wealth creators. They need both our Governments to support them, but too often they are the victims of competing priorities. The UK Government have recognised the importance of increasing productivity, with the publication of the industrial strategy, and city deals are an important part of solving the productivity puzzle. The Glasgow city region deal is investing £44 million in East Renfrewshire.

I was pleased to visit a number of the projects recently. City deals also demonstrate the benefits of Scotland’s two Governments working together rather than pulling apart—we need a heck of a lot more of that.
Meanwhile, businesses in rural Scotland, including areas such as Eaglesham and Uplawmoor, continue to be hampered by poor broadband—a basic necessity in the 21st century. People across Scotland have been hit with a double whammy, as the SNP Government raise taxes on more than 1 million Scots—22,000 of them in my constituency—on top of significant council tax hikes. Local employers suffer under the highest business rates across Europe. I do not understand why the Scottish Government believe that when 80% of our economy is based in the service sector they can boost economic growth by taking more out of hard-working people’s wallets.

The truth is that the Scottish economy needs a kick. It is flattining and the Scottish Government’s high-tax agenda may be the final straw. The UK Government have introduced various measures, including the national living wage, personal allowance increases and wider business initiatives, such as the industrial strategy, to help mitigate some of the damage, but they also can and should do more. We need a pragmatic approach and some better joined-up thinking between Scotland’s two Governments. Nine successive quarters of declining activity in the construction sector, for example, is not acceptable. The hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) dealt well with some of the challenges facing that sector.

Yesterday saw the departure from Holyrood of an Economic Secretary whose legacy is one of declining productivity, skills, job quality and investment, and an economy with one of the lowest GDP growth rates in the OECD. Scotland needs a Scottish Government prepared to invest and give businesses the opportunity and security they so desperately need. Roll on 2021, when we will finally get one.

3.8 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing this important debate. I am about to say might be slightly more boring than previous contributions to this debate.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Never!

**Jamie Stone**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I want to talk about the positive points of the Scottish economy, as well as some of the challenges we face. As always, I will turn hon. Member’s eyes to my constituency in the far north.

First, I want to talk about food and drink. There is no doubt that we have great strengths in the highlands, particularly in my constituency. I will take a leaf out of the book of the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) and name some distilleries in my constituency, which make the most excellent products: Glenmorangie, Balblair, Dalmore, Clynelish and Old Pulteney in Wick. If we combine that with the quality of food that is offered, all the way from the Cocoa Mountain in Durness, which makes the most delicious hot chocolate, to The Alba Farm, which has one Michelin star, in Lochinver, and from Luigi’s in Dornoch to Greens Market in Tain, we can offer a really good tourism product. The success of the north coast 500 is based on what we can offer. There is a message for a wider Scotland in that: if we can get these things right, we can boost the local economy.

**Christine Jardine**: Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment, in that although the highlands has successes, they could have been so much stronger had the Highlands and Islands Enterprise agency not been so undermined since 2007 by a Scottish national Government in Holyrood determined to centralise everything, including enterprise, and to tie HIE’s hands behind its back?

**Jamie Stone**: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Let us not forget that the Highlands and Islands Development Board, as it then was, was introduced by Harold Wilson’s Labour Government because, as was said at the time, the highlands were on the conscience of the rest of Scotland. Anything that undermines enterprise today worries me greatly. Highlands and Islands Enterprise did some research some years ago looking at the word “highland” and what it means. It is synonymous with an unspoilt environment with a particularly special culture. In marketing terms, the word “highland” is a strong tool to use.

I turn to slightly more problematic areas. When I was growing up in the highlands, pretty much all my generation left the area to find employment. They went to England, or abroad. Some went to Canada. My father used to say to me, “When you leave school, you will go away to find work.” Then Nigg came to Easter Ross and provided vital jobs. Some years earlier, Dounreay came to Caithness and offered the same, and the historical depopulation of the highlands, whereby our brightest and best left, was halted and reversed. I brought up my family in Easter Ross. They went to school there, and that might not have happened if I had not had employment at Nigg.

How do we replace that employment? Hopefully, the price of oil will recover, and Global may yet get the contracts we crave. In the case of Dounreay, we have to work out—for not only the local economy but the Scottish economy—how we replace those jobs with high-quality jobs that build on the skills that we have in Caithness and parts of Sutherland. That is a challenge for the Government. It can be done, but it will require a leap of faith at both Scottish and UK level to say, “Yes, we will put a nuclear reactor at Dounreay,” or “Yes, we will approve putting in a big oil platform construction yard at Nigg.” That is what I am looking for on that front.

We had a debate on upland farming yesterday. We need to add value to the farm product. Again, that is linked into the image of the highlands. Upland farming in any other part of Scotland has a clean environmental image that is crucial to marketing, so thought needs to be given to that.

Our towns’ and cities’ infrastructure has been mentioned. Let us not kid ourselves: we have a crisis in many of our town centres, which are drying before our very eyes. Once thriving high streets have far too many charity shops and similar. The issue of bank closures was touched on by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley). That has in no way helped what has been happening in our Scottish towns. I have made this plea before, but for the good of the economy, we should have some sort of one-stop shop, in which the Scottish clearing banks combine to provide a human face offering services at a counter. At the end of the day, a hole in the wall cannot provide the advice that people need.
The challenge for Government is to modernise banking. I have written several times to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ask whether a scheme could be introduced to stop the rot in our town centres. In the widest context of the Scottish economy, if our communities and town centres die, it not only shows rot in the economy, but damages our social infrastructure and our cohesion. With the best will and the best of intentions, we can head off those challenges, but we must all work together to deal with them.

3.14 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing this important debate on the future of Scotland’s economy.

Scotland’s GDP continues to languish in the doldrums and is not forecast to grow by more than 1% per year until at least 2023. A critical indicator of an economy’s future success is the overall level of investment. In Scotland, although foreign investment is high, overall investment is low. That is not a healthy picture, and it is not a solely Scottish problem, but one that affects the entire UK economy. It is one of the key drivers of low productivity.

According to World Bank figures, investment in the UK from public and private sources sits at 17% of our GDP, which puts us 118th in the world. The United States invests 20% of its economy, and Japan invests 24%. The arguments on the need to improve our levels of investment are well rehearsed, but I would like to focus on the need for a fully functioning, effectively organised UK national investment bank to shape the future of Scotland’s economy, and to invest in enterprise—especially, of course, in Scotland. Let me strike a chord of bipartisanship here. I know the Scottish National party has a plan for a Scottish investment bank, and it is a worthy concept, but I want to advance the case for a UK national investment bank.

Jim McColl is one of Scotland’s most successful business people and we should listen to him. He recently commissioned a report from University College London on the case for a UK national investment bank, and I recommend it as a thoroughly sound read. I would be very happy to supply every Member of the House with a digital copy of the report, from which I wish to make three quick points. First,

“By making strategic investments and nurturing new industrial landscapes, a modern industrial strategy focused on solving important societal challenges can help to rebalance the economy and reinvigorate the industrial base.”

Secondly,

“This requires not just any type of finance but patient, long-term, committed finance. This can take different forms, but in many countries, patient strategic finance is increasingly coming from state investment banks...By developing new financial tools and working closely with public and private stakeholders, state investment banks can—if structured effectively—play a leading role driving growth and innovation.”

Thirdly,

“The European Investment Bank...has long been a key source of finance for infrastructure projects in the UK, financing £7 billion of projects in 2016.”

As we leave the EU, we clearly need to consider options to replace the European Investment Bank.

A national investment bank of the type found in many European countries would ensure the availability of quality patient capital. Entrepreneurs have to have access to patient capital, because they need immediate investment for longer-term returns. If businesses do not have access to that quality of capital in our country, they move to where they can get it. If they do not physically move, the ideas that need to be nurtured by patient capital move, and we see the continuation of the old cycle. Britain, and Scotland in particular, is a magnificent nursery of imagination and creativity. New products and concepts start off on their journey of commercialisation on these shores, but end up being fully deployed and exploited elsewhere. That cycle must be broken for good, and the availability of patient capital is crucial.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Jim McColl; I met him recently to discuss the future of commercial shipbuilding in Scotland. The example he cites is exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. In Germany, they have access to patient finance and can finance the capital cost of a ship—up to £1 billion apiece—whereas in Scotland there is simply no facility for that. Does he not agree that a Scottish investment bank, although a laudable proposal, would not be on anywhere near the scale needed to achieve the massive industrial growth that we need?

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why I am advocating, for the future of Scotland’s economy, a UK investment bank. I have had many dealings with Jim McColl, and I agree with the direction of his argument.

Patient capital instils long-term support, builds confidence in the whole commercialisation process, from ideation to launch, and fosters the entrepreneurial spirit of our brightest and best. The return on patient capital invested is a measure of financial success, but when it comes to measuring social good, those things are exponentially better.

I prepared a much longer speech on this subject. I know the Minister might refer to the British Business Bank, but to me it is not really operating to its full potential as an actual real bank. The resource available is too low. It is £200 million a year from the taxpayer for the whole UK economy; that will do little to address the investment shortfall in our economy. Essentially the British Business Bank needs to be reformed to become a real bank with the ability to issue bonds and raise funds.

Finally, in the interests of time—I might have already gone over my time limit, for which I apologise, Mrs Main—I want to ask the Minister a couple of simple questions as we consider the future of Scotland’s economy. Do the Government accept that British businesses and entrepreneurs need an additional source of good quality patient capital—capital that is not currently available in any quantity? What is our Government’s considered view on the proposition that the British Business Bank be converted into a fully functioning national investment bank, on the same basis as the national investment banks in other countries? To agree further with the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), Germany is an example: the KfW is worthy of close examination by the Government, especially as we leave the European Union and have to consider how we will support British businesses—and Scottish businesses in particular—to compete on the global scene.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Mr Drew Hendry, I remind colleagues that I will call the Front Benchers at around half-past.

3.20 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing the debate, and share his disappointment that neither the Secretary of State for Scotland nor any of his team turned out for the debate.

I should like to give some uncommon—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I was just about to give the hon. Gentleman some praise—but carry on.

Stephen Kerr: It is a well-known convention in the House that no Secretary of State or Cabinet Minister responds to debates in Westminster Hall, and the point that the hon. Gentleman made was not entirely fair.

Drew Hendry: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening to what I said, he would know I said “or any of his team”. [Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order.

Drew Hendry: It is such a shame: I was going to offer some unusual, uncommon praise for the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), with whom I commonly duel across the Chamber, where we fervently disagree. However, his speech today was unusually positive. It may have been slightly off track, as he admitted, but judging by its tone he was at least looking for some opportunity.

I would also almost make an honourable exception of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). Until he took an intervention, his speech today was unusually positive. It may have been slightly off track, as he admitted, but judging by its tone he was at least looking for some opportunity.

I would also almost make an honourable exception of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on the new south of Scotland enterprise agency to go with it, he was talking about Scotland’s strengths. Otherwise, what a desperate collection of speeches talking Scotland down—

Christine Jardine rose—

Jamie Stone rose—

Drew Hendry: I will not give way just now. We are short of time.

Scotland has strong economic fundamentals. We heard nothing about its vast natural resources, the innovation there, or the talent of our people. Scotland has the most inward investment of anywhere in the UK outside London.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I am going to make some progress.

That inward investment is happening in the face of Tory austerity, during which time the Scottish Government have focused on building an economy of the future—taking measures to unlock innovation and drive productivity. As we have heard today, productivity is the key, but what we have not heard today is how UK productivity has flatlined for the past decade. As economists will agree, productivity is not everything, but it is almost everything, to an economy.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) talked about the city deals, but not about how, for example, when one of those deals was put together in Inverness, the Scottish Government put in £135 million and the UK Government—in a so-called partnership—put in only £52 million.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am not going to give way. I am going to make some progress; there is limited time in the debate.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire also talked about the Scottish Government having a surplus this year. The Scottish Government work with a fixed budget; they cannot overrun on that. Other Members have mentioned Governments working together, but the present Tory Government cannot even work with the other parties in the Scottish Parliament on Brexit, so how can they be trusted to work with the Scottish Government? The other falsehood—I am sorry, I will take back that word. The other erroneous suggestion made was that Scotland is under a high-tax agenda. That was to forget conveniently that 70% of people in Scotland now pay less tax than they did last year.

The biggest threat to Scotland’s economy comes from the Tory Government’s reckless—[Interruption.]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman’s comments will be heard. Hon. Members will please refrain from barracking.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mrs Main.

The biggest threat to Scotland’s economy comes from the Tory Government’s reckless obsession with a hard Brexit. That is not being challenged by the Labour Front Benchers. We have no protection from it. The Scottish Government have put forward, in “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, an option to enable Scotland to avoid the worst effects and stay in the single market and customs union. Incidentally, this week the EU chief negotiator Guy Verhofstadt said that that would be entirely acceptable. Scotland is likely to be hammered by a hard Brexit.

Christine Jardine: On that point—

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make progress. The Fraser of Allander Institute estimates that 80,000 jobs are at risk.

Paul Masterton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to carry on, because I have only a minute.

The UK Government are paying no real attention to stimulating the oil and gas industry. Fortunately there is now an upturn in oil and gas prices, and we need investment from the UK Government.
I have much more to say, and as we are the third party in Parliament I should have hoped for more time to say it, but unfortunately that is not the case—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not under a time limit. I was just indicating that other colleagues wish to speak.

Drew Hendry: In that case I will keep going; thank you very much for allowing me to do that.

Jamie Stone: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to misunderstand me. I do not decry the efforts being made by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. However, anyone who thinks that despite its best efforts it is more than a poor shadow of what went before, in the Highlands and Islands Development Board, is in dreamland. Surely hon. Members agree with me about that.

Drew Hendry: I disagree, and so do many businesses that I interact with in the highlands on a daily basis.

Production efficiency in the oil sector has risen for the fifth consecutive year, reaching 74% in 2017, demonstrating sustained efficiency improvements and maximising the economic recovery. Oil & Gas UK’s “Business Outlook for 2018” shows growth in investment and a further 5% increase in the forecast production for that year. Recent industry announcements about BP’s successful working discoveries in the Capercaillie and Achmelvich wells and Shell’s redevelopment of the Penguins field demonstrate the investment potential that the UK fields still hold. Over the next decade our successful working discoveries in the Capercaillie and Achmelvich wells and Shell’s redevelopment of the Penguins field demonstrate the investment potential that the UK fields still hold. Over the next decade our oil and gas sector can capitalise on the decommissioning that the UK fields still hold. Over the next decade our successful working discoveries in the Capercaillie and Achmelvich wells and Shell’s redevelopment of the Penguins field demonstrate the investment potential that the UK fields still hold. Over the next decade our oil and gas sector can capitalise on the decommissioning market, which is forecast to reach £17 billion; but that is only if the right decisions on investment are made.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman points out the challenges for the oil and gas sector, but on Monday when the Scottish Affairs Committee was taking evidence on the sector in Aberdeen, we heard people saying they wanted fracking to be expanded in Scotland. Does he support the industry in making that call?

Drew Hendry: I certainly do not support fracking. I do not believe that a country as rich in natural resources and renewable energy as we are—and indeed one with the oil and gas industry that we have at the moment—needs to go for fracking. I absolutely support the ban on fracking in Scotland. [Hon. Members: “There is no ban!”] There is a ban in Scotland. As to an effective ban, a court cannot go ahead in Scotland under the current situation.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Unfortunately I am a bit late to the debate, but I have been paying attention. I am amazed by the efforts of Conservative Members, in relation to thinking of Scotland as a country. They are the people who want to see Scotland as a region. [Interjection.] They should remember that the Norwegians have an oil fund, whereas they have squandered Scotland’s oil.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman should resume his seat. He was not making an intervention, but engaging in a debate with the Opposition. He attended the debate very late.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mrs Main.

The other issue I wanted to touch on was the opportunity for carbon capture and storage development in Scotland. There is a measure of co-operation between the UK and Scottish Governments, but there is nowhere near the required level of ambition from the UK Government. The rug was pulled out from under Peterhead, where £1 billion of investment was supposed to be put into the carbon capture and storage operation. At the time, that was judged to be just about enough. Now, the UK Government’s overall investment in carbon capture and storage is set to be about £100 million, which is desperately insufficient for the needs of the carbon capture industry, and nowhere near the amount needed to show the ambition that we should be showing to lead that industry. I will draw my remarks to a close, and I thank you, Mrs Main, for allowing me the extra time.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman was not on a time limit. With the permission of the Front Benchers, I will take four extra minutes from them and place a two-minute time limit on the last two Back-Bench Members, who have been here for the entire debate.

3.30 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I will be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing this debate. He started with a tettie point, which was repeated by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). A UK Minister is present to respond on the UK Government’s behalf, and I do not see any problem with that.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said that in his speech, he would mention a third way—a Labour way—and I was excited about that, because on Monday night, the small rump of Scottish Labour MPs voted three different ways in the Heathrow debate. Some voted for it, some voted against it, and others joined the Scottish National party in sitting on their hands. In a debate about the future of Scotland’s economy, it is interesting that not a single SNP Member who has spoken or intervened has mentioned their last-minute decision to change their mind about Heathrow on orders from Nicola Sturgeon and to stop the investment into Scotland’s jobs and economy.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman spoke for 10 minutes; I cannot take an intervention from him.

SNP Members sat on their hands and abstained, despite talking in the debate about all the positive interventions that would come to Scotland as a result of Heathrow’s expansion.

It is good that some SNP MSPs can speak out against their party. My hon. Friends have quoted a report, “Scotland’s Economic Performance”, by a cross-party committee of the Scottish Parliament and supported by SNP MSPs, which says:

“Levels of GDP growth are marginal; productivity is low and wages are stagnant.”

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Douglas Ross: No—I will not give way to some Johnny-come-lately.

Eleven years of SNP power in Scotland have resulted in its own MSPs criticising it. We have two Governments in Scotland—a UK Government and a Scottish Government—who should be working together, but all we get from the SNP is its obsession with independence and picking fights with Westminster, rather than standing up for my Moray constituents and others.

3.32 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing this debate.

After a decade of the Scottish National party and eight years of a Conservative Government, what will the future of Scotland’s economy be? Where are the jobs, the finance and the security for our next generation of young workers as we enter the uncharted waters of life outside the European Union? After a recent trip to Brussels, we were told that Brexit is over. In Europe, we have already left—only the paperwork has to be filled in. Deal or no deal, we are out of the European market.

Section 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 should have been fixed in time for Scotland’s voice to be heard, but without the SNP’s approval, and with a Tory party that could not make amends or recommendations, the buck was passed to the House of Lords. The SNP could only huff and puff and walk out of the House for five minutes as it was blowing down, with their instructions to walk out following behind them.

I sympathise with the Scottish Government, who, like us, waited on our amendments to section 11. For the Tories to fail to deliver on the will of the Scottish people puts our devolution settlement at risk, with fewer powers and a breakdown between the two Governments.

What will the future of the economy be when we have low wages, fewer working hours, temporary jobs, agency work and, of course—the way to get unemployment figures down—zero-hours contracts? What chance do our Scottish youth have of building a future, securing housing, raising a family or providing for themselves before caring for others? It really is a game of survival. In 2018, it is sad that the only growth and development in Scotland is in food banks.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, Alison Thewliss, I ask her to try to confine her remarks to eight minutes.

3.34 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I will try, Mrs Main. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) for securing this spirited debate. Hon. Members have lots of ideas about the Scottish economy, which is always something to welcome.

I take issue with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis of a decade of lost opportunity. It is no coincidence that that decade has also seen Tory austerity writ large and a financial crash caused by the previous Westminster Administration. We have had to put up with the consequences and do the best we can with one hand tied behind our back.

Ged Killen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Thewliss: My time is constrained, and there are a couple of hon. Members I want to mention, but I will try to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman if I can.

I would also take issue with anybody who says that the Scottish National party has a lack of ambition; we could not have more ambition for our country than to take control of all the financial levers to improve the conditions for our people. With the powers of independence, that is exactly what we would do.

Scotland’s economy is performing relatively well on many indicators. It is a country with many economic strengths: it is an attractive place to work, live and conduct business.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The end of property business rates relief in Aberdeen is doing a lot of damage to the business community, which is having, essentially, to knock down buildings. Does the hon. Lady agree that that policy went far too far, and that there have been consequences that the Scottish Government did not foresee? Would she recommend that Scottish Government Ministers reverse it?

Alison Thewliss: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has made those representations to the Minister and that the Minister will take them on board.

We have one of the lowest youth unemployment rates, not just in the UK, but in the whole of the EU. We have been described as the most highly qualified population anywhere in Europe, and we are the most successful part of the UK outside London when it comes to attracting foreign investment. Our exports have gone up 44.7% under the SNP, to more than £29.8 billion in 2016, which is no small feat. Scotland was the only part of the UK where employment went up in the last year.

We have a well-deserved international reputation in a range of growth sectors of the economy, such as life sciences, the creative industries, and food and drink, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned. Those sectors are an asset to our country. We are also making great strides in renewable energy. Through Scottish Enterprise, we have invested an additional £45 million in business research over the next three years.

There is no doubt that Scotland is a wealthy nation, but challenges remain. Like other advanced economies, we face long-term structural inequality. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health has found that the decisions taken by the Tory Government in the 1980s are still having repercussions. [Interruption.] The post-industrial impact that hon. Members on the Government side are chortling about has had a long-term effect on my constituents and constituents across Scotland.

It is not only possible to grow the economy while tackling that inequality; it is absolutely imperative. The type of growth that is built on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable, and that comes at the expense of the environment, is almost not worth having.
The OECD estimates that, between 1990 and 2010, rising income inequality in the UK reduced our economic output per head by 9%. Inequality stunts economic growth, and Scotland is no exception. It is time to shift the focus of the debate away from short-term reckless growth and towards a more sustainable model built on inclusion, dignity and respect. Economic choices are not just about the bottom line; they should reflect the society that we want to live in.

My colleagues in the Scottish Government have received international attention for the work they have done so far on inclusive growth. Putting that at the heart of our economic strategy has led to different outcomes in Scotland. We want to make choices such as a Scottish national investment bank, and I am glad that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) welcome that. The hon. Member for Stirling mentioned KfW, a bank in Germany that I visited when I was on the Communities and Local Government Committee. It was set up as part of the Marshall plan in 1945. We know that it works, but we have never done the same for ourselves. It makes absolute sense for us to do that, and it is interesting that the hon. Gentleman looks to pinch the Scottish Government’s ideas for the UK. There should be more of that in future—why not?

We are also researching a citizen’s basic income, and we invest in human capital by keeping university tuition free for all. We also pay better in Scotland. We have more living wage employers per head than anywhere else in the UK, and we seek the real living wage, not the Tories’ pretend living wage, which has age discrimination baked into it. Although the Labour party might wish to have a £10 living wage, it did not give the Scottish Government power over that policy; we asked for the devolution of employment law, and it stood firmly against that.

Like the rest of the UK, Scotland has an ageing population. It is great that people are living longer, but it presents several challenges to our economy—not least an increased old-age dependency ratio. With fewer working-age people in proportion to the number of older people, tax revenues become lower and public spending on pensions and healthcare becomes higher. That makes it more difficult to keep public finances stable for the future. There are two ways to improve the situation. One is to increase labour market participation, which we are trying to do. We have created free childcare services, which are a known driver for getting women into work. Increased female employment has also been linked to higher productivity, to economies that are more resilient to recession, and to a multitude of improvements to health and wellbeing outcomes.

The other way to protect our economy from the problems arising from an ageing population is to increase immigration. The Tories have stood against devolving immigration law to Scotland, despite our particular circumstances, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West recognised in his speech. Immigration law is a reserved matter. At constituency surgeries every single Friday, I see the impact of a Government keen to decrease immigration and ignore the large net contribution to our economy of those who choose to come and make their home in Scotland. I see the devastating effects of a hostile environment created by a UK Government Home Office hellbent on reducing migration for no economic purpose whatever. That includes the highly skilled migrants group, on behalf of which I have been campaigning. They come here, pay taxes and have not taken a day’s benefits in their life, yet the Government see fit to deport them for making entirely legitimate changes to their tax returns.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): At the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, we had experts in. We questioned them on a separate immigration policy. They used the word “shambles” directly to describe having a separate immigration policy in any region of the United Kingdom. Does the hon. Lady agree that the SNP should maybe start listening to experts? We would then see the best outcomes for Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: Coming from the party that regularly likes to run down experts and their views, that is a bit rich. What is a shambles is the situation I see for my constituents week in, week out. Their lives are made an absolute misery by the Home Office. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has been to Canada and has spoken about how a differentiated immigration policy can work in practice. There is no reason why Scotland cannot do that.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Thewliss: No, I am conscious of time, and I am running out of it. It is estimated that each additional EU migrant working in Scotland pays £10,400 in tax towards our NHS and other public services. The Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde used advanced modelling techniques to estimate the impact of reduced migration after Brexit on Scotland’s economy. In its Brexit scenario, aggregate GDP is 9% lower by 2065, all other things held constant.

If there is one thing that is certain for Scotland after Brexit, it is that all other things will not be held constant. It is estimated by the Scottish Government that leaving the single market—a position backed by both the Conservatives and Labour—will reduce output by 8.5% by 2030, which is equivalent to a loss of £2,300 a year for each person in Scotland. Of course, the UK Government do not agree with the figure, having conducted their own analysis of the impact of Brexit on Scotland’s economy. Their analysis presents an even worse scenario, with output reduced by 9% over the next 15 years.

We are at a crucial point in determining the future of our economy. We have to take into account that we are having Brexit as a result of an internal debate within the Conservative party that got out of hand. Only one party has a clear and meaningful vision for the future of Scotland’s economy: the SNP. We have looked at the issue. We have the Sustainable Growth Commission, a suite of recommendations and a robust plan for the type of Scotland we would like to see. The report calls for more investment to grow Scotland’s economy by increasing population, participation and productivity. Some of that can be done now, but some of it cannot. We require cross-party support for some of the things we want to see, whether that is devolving some of those powers to Scotland to let us get on with the job, or whether it is independence, where we could have the full suite of powers without having one hand tied behind
our back. Through that, we could make changes for the benefit of all our population, not just the Tories and their cronies.

3.43 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Main. I start by thanking my good friend and comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), for securing this debate and for making a speech that cut to the very heart of the problems that will face the Scottish economy in the decades to come.

With the impending threat of Brexit and the threat of a second Scottish independence referendum always on the horizon, it strikes me that once again people in Scotland are caught in a vice between two Governments who are absolutely intent on causing them economic harm in pursuit of their own nationalist and constitutionally driven agendas. We have seen that writ large today. It is not about talking Scotland down. In fact, speeches today have reflected the passion that Members have for standing up for their constituents and their economic interests. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) talked about the real issue of the massive job cuts her constituents face. Calling that “talking Scotland down” does a real disservice to Members in this Chamber.

People in Scotland have been let down on two counts over the past 10 years. First, a UK Government have taken the political choice—I emphasise that it is a choice—to implement austerity. Secondly, a Scottish Government, rather than use the powers they have to alleviate and mitigate those austerity measures, have consistently chosen to use the Scottish Parliament as a conveyor belt simply to pass that austerity on and, indeed, amplify it at the local government level. That is not what the Scottish Parliament was meant to be and not what those of us on these Benches who fought long and hard for its creation envisaged.

We envisaged a Parliament in Edinburgh that would be a bulwark against Tory austerity, would stand up and be counted and would choose a different path. Trends show that the Scottish economy is lagging behind that of the rest of the UK in terms of growth, productivity and employment. In 2017, growth stood at just 0.8%, while the Scottish Fiscal Commission predicts that growth will remain at less than 1% until 2024—something that the Fraser of Allander Institute has labelled as “unprecedented in a generation”. It is the slowest period of long-term growth in the Scottish economy in over 60 years.

I would of course like to caveat that with the fact that statistics released this morning show that growth has increased by 0.2% during the first quarter of 2018, which is slightly higher than in the UK as a whole. That news is of course welcome, but I should like to think that everyone in the room today would like to see improvement and would agree that the long-term growth trend remains insufficient. Productivity was mentioned by several Members, and it has dropped by 2.2% in the past year alone. It is a fundamental economic principle that to generate economic growth, a country must increase productivity. To increase productivity, two very important factors must be addressed: investment and an interventionist industrial strategy.

Scotland’s productivity ranks in the third quartile of OECD countries, and the rate of productivity growth in Scotland lags behind that of many of our competitors. To catch up, Scotland must expedite a significant increase in its rate of productivity growth. Achieving the required growth would be truly transformational for the Scottish economy. Increasing Scotland’s productivity to the level of the top quartile of OECD countries would grow GDP by almost £45 billion, which is an increase of 30%. Annual average wages would be more £6,500 higher, which is an increase of 25%. That is the prize if we can address the structural problem.

Just 10 businesses in Scotland account for 45% of all private sector R&D activity in Scotland. Almost 70% of R&D investment is by non-Scottish-owned businesses. Despite higher education R&D rates in Scotland being among the highest in the world, we have seen a significant disconnect between academic innovation and its application by industry in Scotland. There is obvious potential to increase industrial interaction with higher education, and addressing that is a major focus of the innovation centres, such as the advanced forming research centre, that were set up by the last Labour Government.

Much work is still to be done. To match the rate of the top quartile of OECD countries, business R&D investment in Scotland would need to be £10 billion a year—an increase of £10 billion a year. Companies that are looking to grow are not considering external funding, and that raises questions about the level of growth ambition and whether ambitions can be achieved through internal funding alone. Poor competitiveness in productivity, innovation and capital investment also hinder the scope to drive export sales and grow overall industrial production. Around 60% of Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises trade only within Scotland. Scotland’s exports are also highly concentrated. Just 15 businesses account for 30% of all international exports, and 70 firms account for 50%. Scotland’s key international export markets remain Europe and the USA, with sales to emerging markets relatively low; and five sectors account for 50% of exports in Scotland.

Labour is absolutely committed to addressing the problems we see in our growth and productivity levels, not only in Scotland, but across the entirety of the UK. In our manifesto, we detailed the investment we would make in economic development in the event of a UK Labour Government. In Scotland, that would mean £70 billion over a 10-year period: £20 billion through our proposals to enhance the Scottish Investment Bank, providing patient long-term finance to industry, which the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned; £20 billion through our national transformation fund; and £30 billion that Scotland would benefit from through enhanced Barnett consequentials. If the hon. Gentleman is so enthusiastic about Labour policies, I encourage him to consider crossing the Floor, instead of having to lobby his Ministers for the same policies.

Scottish Labour has also committed to a proper industrial strategy, which has unfortunately been sorely lacking in the UK and Scottish Governments’ plans. Our industrial strategy would generate high-skilled, high-quality, stable employment for men and women. It would encourage a diversification of ownership models and the governance of our industrial base, encourage and actively support the role of trade unions in the economy, and recognise and resource the critical role of innovation in developing sectors of our economy.
Critical to all those pledges is the investment I spoke about. We must recognise that the role of a Government is to be an enabler—part of a triple helix of private entrepreneurs, research-led universities and an entrepreneurial state, assisting where there is potential to develop sectors, create new high-skilled, high-paid jobs, and sustain and grow viable enterprises.

We must never forget the human cost of failing to address those issues, of a stagnating economy that results in unemployment, and of an economy that is propped up by low-skilled, low-paid jobs, meaning that we have the scandalous situation in which 52% of all adults living in poverty in Scotland are in employment. Whether people like it or not, it is a fact that the UK economy is propped up by low-skilled, low-paid jobs. The Office for National Statistics recently indicated that the number of zero-hours contracts has increased to 1.8 million. That is 1.8 million workers across the UK who do not know what their income will be from week to week. Is that really the way we want our economy to function—built on the back of low-paid and insecure work?

That takes me back to the points I made about our industrial strategy. We have been explicit in our desire to ban zero-hours contracts on the basis that they are exploitative and ensure that our economy is skewed in favour of big business while ordinary working people suffer. If we were in any doubt about the truth of that, we need only to look at the Scottish Fiscal Commission’s findings, which state that real wages are lower today than they were in 2010 and are predicted to continue falling this year. It is simply not good enough.

While the UK Government and the Scottish Government bicker over constitutional intricacies, people are struggling to feed their children. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, more than 230,000 children in Scotland live in poverty. Just let that sink in for a second: one in every four children in Scotland is in poverty today. That should shame every single one of us.

We are on the cusp of a great opportunity, with the fourth industrial revolution now under way. One of the great achievements in Scotland under the last Labour Government was to reverse Scotland’s historical population decline, but there is so much more to do. We need to enhance population growth in Scotland. In 1902, the Scottish Registrar General predicted that by 1962 the Scottish population would be 10 million. Clearly we never achieved that, so we have a great opportunity to make up for lost ground.

We are on the cusp of that opportunity. That is why I am proud to stand here today as a Labour MP who can say that when there is a UK Labour Government and a Labour Government in Scotland we will address the inequalities in our society and the structural problems that we have identified in today’s debate. It is time for the UK Government and the Scottish Government to stop burying their heads in the sand when it comes to such issues purely because they are deemed too difficult to deal with.

We are ready to govern this country in a way that works for the many, not the few. If others are not, I have one message: call a general election and let us get on with it, because we are ready to invest in Scotland and to ensure that Scotland’s economy and people do not suffer anymore due to the short-sighted nature of their current Governments.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) on securing the debate. I am sorry that he is not as pleased to see me as I am to respond to the debate. I point out to him that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, I am a UK Minister. I am proud of being part of a Unionist UK Government, and I will work with my colleagues—and colleagues across the Floor—from Scotland just as much as I will work with colleagues from Wales and, indeed, from my own constituency.

Mr Sweeney: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: No—I have very little time, in fairness, and I want to get through quite a few of the points that have been raised. This has been a very good and lively debate. I said it was a pleasure to be here. At the beginning of it, I was thinking, “What have I walked into?” However, it is a pleasure.

A fundamental change is going on in the global economy that will throw up both opportunities and challenges for Scotland and the rest of the UK. Automation, artificial intelligence, growing digital connectivity and the need to deliver environmentally sustainable growth will profoundly affect the way that we do business, how businesses function and how people work. As we plan for Scotland’s economic future, the UK Government are confident that Scotland is well placed to take advantage of the changes that will affect the entire economy. Scotland is an open and enterprising nation, with some of the best universities and research institutions in the world. As part of the UK, it has a global reputation for welcoming businesses with high standards, respected institutions and a strong rule of law.

It is the job of Government to ensure that business is ready to respond to change, and that is why we have created the industrial strategy, which is incredibly important. Through the four grand challenges that we have identified, the UK can become a global technological revolution leader in clean growth, artificial intelligence and big data, the future of mobility, and meeting the needs of an ageing society—something that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) rightly mentioned.

In all those areas, Scotland can make a fantastic contribution. Edinburgh is becoming one of the UK’s most important clusters for AI and digital technology. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has announced an AI sector deal, bringing around £1 billion of investment through public and industry funding. That will ensure that it is a vibrant sector and has the resources and structures in place to survive.

I am pleased that we have already made an announcement about the construction industry, which the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) rightly highlighted. We will report back later in the year, once all the details have been agreed. I am glad that she raised that. Equally, there is the food and drink sector, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West mentioned.
I am conscious that time is going fast, and I want to respond to some of the issues that were raised. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West talked about a “third way”. We heard that before with the previous Labour Government, which landed us with a £150 billion deficit. This Government have had to work hard to get that deficit down, which has not been easy. The Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), said that those are “choices”. It is the reality of ensuring that we have an economy that is balanced and in which people have confidence, so that we can get the investment we need to create the growth that has brought millions of new jobs for people in this country. We are seeing record levels of employment. That is a record of which I am proud.

Mr Sweeney: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: No, I am not taking any interventions, because I am very conscious of time.

Brexit was also mentioned. I have heard it said time and time again that the Government are hell bent on a hard Brexit. If anything, we are hell bent on ensuring that we get a deal that works for the UK and the EU. I have faith in my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She has achieved agreements when the media and people in this House thought that she could not. Let us have faith in her and support her as she goes to the June Council, and I am sure that we will have a Brexit deal that will work.

I agreed with what the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said about the deficit in Scotland. It is concerning that as a share of GDP the deficit is 8.3% in Scotland, compared with 2.4% for the rest of the UK. That needs to be addressed. Not dealing with the deficit really knocks confidence. People in business will not be confident if it is not being dealt with properly.

We also heard about low wages. I remind hon. Members that it was this Government that dealt with the personal allowance, which is benefiting some 2.5 million Scots’ wage packets. We have increased the minimum wage to a living wage—from £5.80, as it was in 2010, to £7.83—bringing £4,000 a year more to the lowest paid in the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) was right to show the differing figures, comparing the UK performance with the Scottish performance. We on this side are determined to work with the Scottish Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland worked closely with the former Economy Secretary in Scotland. That needs to continue.

Some of the comments that have been made today are absolutely right. We have challenges ahead of us, but we also have opportunities. As we can now develop trading agreements around the world, I want us to expand that for the whole of the UK, so that every part of the UK can benefit. Scotland is as important a part of this nation as any other.

As I said, the hon. Member for Midlothian was right to talk about the construction industry. She talked about overthrowing capitalism being a bigger issue. I would say that, yes, it certainly is—and one that would seriously damage the economy of this country. I hope that people will take note.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) talked about a UK investment bank. We are always open to positive proposals to support the economy. The UK Government will consider any such proposal, ensuring that it offers value for money. I will ensure that I raise those points with colleagues in the Treasury following today’s debate.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said that we were talking Scotland down. We are determined to ensure that our economy works for every part of the UK, and we are working with the oil and gas industry to ensure that there is a sector deal. In the last 10 seconds I have, I say to the SNP that constant talk of independence does nothing to give confidence to business to invest in the UK.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
BAME Blood, Stem Cell and Organ Donation

[Sir Henry Bellingham in the Chair]

4 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered BAME blood, stem cell and organ donation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I first became aware of the issue of blood, stem cell and organ donation within black, Asian, mixed race and minority ethnic communities when I met Poonam Shah, who works in my constituency. Poonam’s husband, Rakesh, died from a blood disorder at the age of just 35. Due to Rakesh’s Indian heritage, he struggled to find a donor with the 10 matching genes that would have helped ensure that his blood would accept the donor’s cells. Eventually, an anonymous donor with eight out of 10 matches was found from South Africa for Rakesh, who had a stem cell transplant in October 2014.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this important debate. I should declare that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on stem cell transplantation. My hon. Friend makes a point that is particularly relevant for the BAME community—often the donor will come from outside the UK. There have been a number of cases where there have been difficulties with visas. Time is vital in this area and we need a fast-track process to make sure that those people can get here as quickly as possible.

Mohammad Yasin: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I recognise the work that he has done as the chair of the APPG on stem cells. This is a very important issue, and that is why we are having this debate today.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Those from the BAME community make up 5% of blood donors, yet they make up 14% of the population. The Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign was set up in my own city of Manchester; it has had a tremendous success rate of 3,408 donations. To be successful, it is important to ensure that cultural initiatives such as such as Cure Kaiya, which held an event in my constituency, and Match4Rajie are encouraging more people from BAME backgrounds to become registered donors.

Mohammad Yasin: My hon. Friend makes a very important point.

In November, Poonam’s fundraising efforts were recognised when she was awarded individual fundraiser of the year. I was so inspired by her story that I wanted to help raise awareness of the issue in BAME communities, because none of us know whether we or one of our loved ones might be a name on that list in need of a match, desperately waiting for a lifesaving opportunity. The reality is that many patients will not receive the stem cell transplant they need, because either there is no donor available or a donor cannot be found quickly enough. Only 20% of BAME patients receive the best possible match, compared with 69% of white, northern European patients.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. I have always supported the issue of organ transplants, including for BAME people. With only six out of every 100 people who have signed up to the NHS organ donor register having told us that they are from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities, does the hon. Gentleman feel as I feel that when it comes to organ donation, every race is needed and we should urge the Minister to respond with a focused campaign for BAME donation? That is the best way forward and I think the Minister needs to do that.

Mohammad Yasin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point. The disparity urgently needs to be addressed and I therefore welcome the very timely review by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on BAME stem cell and organ donation.

The problem of insufficient blood, stem cell and organ donation is fundamentally one of supply and demand. According to the review, fewer than 5% of donors who gave blood in the past year were from BAME communities, although the BAME group makes up around 14% of the total UK population. Currently, only 1% of people who give blood in England are black. BAME people are unequally affected by that, as they are subject to a higher demand and shorter supply than other groups. The most common blood diseases that affect BAME communities are thalassaemia and sickle cell disease.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. I have always supported the issue of organ transplants, including for BAME people. With only six out of every 100 people who have signed up to the NHS organ donor register having told us that they are from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities, does the hon. Gentleman feel as I feel that when it comes to organ donation, every race is needed and we should urge the Minister to respond with a focused campaign for BAME donation? That is the best way forward and I think the Minister needs to do that.

Mohammad Yasin: I agree with the hon. Lady. BAME donors make up 15% of the stem cell register; black donors make up just 1.2% of potential donors on the British Bone Marrow Registry. I hope the Minister shares my
concerns about those statistics and that she will commit today to agreeing in full to the recommendations of the review by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this timely debate. My review, “Ending the Silent Crisis”, is about the lack of stem cell and organ donation in black and minority ethnic groups. I hope that the Minister will look at the review’s recommendations, take them on board and come back to us on them.

Mohammad Yasin: I thank my hon. Friend for her hard work on the review and I look forward to working together on the issue.

It is clear that increasing the number of BAME stem cell donors requires a many-sided approach, but one of the most important things that can be done is to integrate information about donation into the formal curriculum, which the review recommends. We already know that education works. For example, Anthony Nolan and other blood disorder charities have had great success working with schools, universities and colleges across the UK. Just last month, I wrote a letter to all schools with a sixth form in or near my constituency to ask whether they would consider using an assembly or personal, social, health and economic lessons to teach students about the importance of donating stem cells, blood and organs. I am delighted that one of the schools has already agreed to do so.

Since the Hero Project started in 2009, more than 32,000 people have signed up to the Anthony Nolan stem cell donor register, and approximately 16% of them are from a BAME background. The Hero Project recognises that the different religious views about organ donation are one of the barriers preventing people from signing up to the organ donation register. Anthony Nolan and other blood disorder charities recognise and respect diverse views and tailor their message to suit different interpretations of faith. They focus on what people can do to help, not on what they cannot do.

The review found that the three main barriers that prevent people from signing up are a lack of knowledge or awareness, religious permissibility and a lack of trust in medical institutions. The opt-out system for organ and tissue donation, with additional safeguards, is welcome, but there must be an awareness campaign that is mindful of the cultural sensitivities relating to organ donation and addresses the significant pressure on NHS Blood and Transplant’s capacity to accommodate any rise in organ donations.

It is vital that we get more young people from BAME backgrounds, such as students, to sign up to the stem cell donor register, because the research shows that the younger the donor, the more likely the patient is to survive. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that all students aged 16 and above have the opportunity to learn about the importance of donating stem cells, blood and organs? There is a real desire in the BAME community—especially among the younger generation—to turn this issue around.

I was touched by the action of the Bandhan Bedford Group, a group of Asian professional women in my constituency who helped to add 300 new names to the stem cell register. They organised a stem cell drive this month in Bedford, with support from the blood cancer charity DKMS, to help Kaiya Patel, a five-year-old girl who I understand is still waiting for a lifesaving match for her rare and aggressive form of leukaemia. I know that similar drives are taking place around the country, but this is a race against time. It has been reported that, to have a chance, Kaiya needs a transplant within the next two months.

There is a strong will out there to increase the life chances of people from a BAME background. I hope that this timely review, which highlights the scale of this silent crisis, is enough to spur the Government into assisting communities with a more co-ordinated approach. This blatant inequality must end.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend for her interest: my husband had a stem cell transplant three years ago. His donor came from this country. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we are to meet the needs of BAME patients who require a stem cell transplant, we must work with international registers? Increasing BAME donation in the UK alone is not enough. Some 60% of UK patients already receive stem cell transplants from international donors. That is made possible by Anthony Nolan’s incredible volunteer couriers, who collect donated stem cells around the world and transport them to patients. I hope the Minister will explain what steps the Government will take to support international registers.

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend has stolen one of the questions I was going to ask the Minister, but I will forgive her.

In 2016, a young woman in my constituency called Lara, who was 27 years old and from a BAME background, needed a stem cell donor. The constituency snapped into action and organised the Match4Lara campaign. Elana Wall and Jacob Haddad, the volunteer co-ordinators for Anthony Nolan, co-ordinated 40 volunteers who spent their evenings packing spit kits and organising spit drives and spit drive socials. I went to a spit drive in the O2 Centre on Finchley Road, and I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the youngsters—especially those from a BAME background—who realised that if they took the spit test on the spot, there was a chance they could save a life. My younger sister, Azmina, participated and said that she found the science very accessible. She understood that she needed to raise awareness of the issue among young people. She has recently had a call to say that she could be a potential match for a patient.

Will the Minister address the request to integrate awareness-raising into the school curriculum? Will she talk about how the Department of Health and Social Care can work with international donor banks? That
issue has been raised a few times already. How does she intend to spread the word about stem cell donation among young people, especially those from BAME backgrounds?

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important debate on an issue that has been exercising me for the past year. Since I became Minister with responsibility for this area, the disparity in access for people from black and minority ethnic communities to blood, organs and stem cells has been of great concern to me. I have been working with NHSBT on this theme for the past year, and I hope I can give the hon. Gentleman some comfort. We are making some progress, but I want to assure all hon. Members that I am under no illusions about how big this challenge is, for a host of reasons that I will come on to.

I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for being here. I read her report with interest and agreed with every word. The principles she articulated are key to increasing donation. If I were to highlight one particular issue, it would be the culture of normalising donation in those communities. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) has just given a beautiful example of how local leadership can do that, and that is something we can all take away.

Whenever we debate a subject like organ and blood donation, everyone brings their own personal story, because we have all been touched by people who have needed a transplant. That is what brings the issue alive for us; it is about saving lives.

My overall objective is to increase the rate of donation across the board. Although it is true that a person is more likely to die waiting for a transplant if they are from a black and minority ethnic community, the fact is that we are losing too many people who are waiting for a transplant. We need a concerted effort to improve the rate of donation from all parts of our society. There is much we can do to achieve that. Hon. Members will be aware of the private Member’s Bill from the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), which seeks to change the opt-out system. It will be a big help, but it will not solve the problem by itself. There is a lot more we need to do to educate the public about the importance of donation and to dispel the fears and myths about it.

Colleen Fletcher: The Minister mentioned the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson). I hope she is aware that stem cell transplantation is very much done when the person is alive, which is what makes it so easy. People do not have to die to donate. I just want to make sure people listening to this debate know that.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a point well made. It is the same for blood, of course—donors do not have to die to give blood. People who give blood do so regularly because they get into the habit and it has become normal. Perhaps we need to do a lot more about stem cell transplants.

I am particularly moved to be having this debate today because only this weekend I lost a very good friend of mine to lymphoma at the age of 47. That brings home how cancer and illness can kill people at a very young age. It will be in honour of my dear friend David Furze that I will do something to reboot stem cell donation.

On the barriers to more donation, some have serious concerns about faith and religious beliefs. Tackling those concerns is a big challenge for us in Government, because of the element of trust. The hon. Member for Bedford mentioned that quite often people do not trust medical professionals, but they trust Government even less. We must find innovative ways of getting that message out. We need the right messengers. Dare I say, the people in this Chamber are among the right messengers?

Most of us have respect in our communities and are able to show leadership in our communities. We can go out, speak, raise awareness and encourage donation. I have given NHSBT the challenge to do exactly that.

Eleanor Smith: Other organisations are also trying to do that, such as the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust, but they get very limited resources. One of my recommendations is about sharing resources with groups that are already organised and going out to the community, because with limited resources they can do very little.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The NHSBT strategy has that in mind. Recently, we had a faith summit where we worked with the individuals who are able to go out and give those messages. The approach must be organic. I have also tasked NHSBT to work with me to develop an MP’s toolkit to help us to go out in our constituencies and develop the right networks and links. The hon. Lady is right to say that people from these communities will listen to their elders and other representatives, and that is why we need to work through those people. We are doing that with a number of organisations.

Turning to stem cell donation, all hon. Members articulated beautifully the real disparity of access to appropriate treatment. It is only by building and diversifying the UK stem cell register that we will be able to provide the best match for patients. Hon. Members have raised the issue of an international register; the Department funds Anthony Nolan’s efforts in this area. Members of the World Marrow Donor Association already promote global collaboration. We will continue to support that as best we can, working with Anthony Nolan and NHSBT.

NHSBT continues to grow both its cord blood banks and bone marrow donor registers, with the explicit intent of increasing the number of black and Asian donors. Overall, we have paid more than £20 million to NHSBT and Anthony Nolan specifically for stem cell donation since 2015. So far, we have made some progress in increasing donations from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, but not nearly enough to address the disparity. We will all continue to make our efforts count in that area.

I pay tribute to the initiative of the Bandhan Bedford Group that the hon. Member for Bedford mentioned. If there is a good local champion that captures local imagination, real progress can be made. We all need to encourage those sorts of activities.
Turning to blood, there is a real need for black donors and donors from the Asian community to increase supplies, not least because they are more likely to suffer from diseases that will require blood transfusions, specifically sickle cell anaemia. We are undertaking initiatives to increase the number of black and Asian blood donors. We are holding “know your type” events in high population areas, where people can learn their blood type with a finger prick test. That will help NHSBT to manage its blood stocks and develop a database of exactly the type of blood that there is a shortage of.

We are supporting others, such as the music of black origin awards, to reach audiences. Those who watch “Britain’s Got Talent”—I watch it—will have seen the B Positive choir, who did so much to raise awareness and were absolutely fantastic.

Mr Dhesi: In terms of outreach work, whether with the MOBO awards or otherwise, can the Minister outline the steps that have been taken to reach out via the media? I am not just referring to the national media but the culturally specific and ethnic media, which have a greater outreach in those ethnic minority communities.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I could not give him a definitive answer at this moment in time. I would expect NHSBT to be using those outlets to spread the message. If it is not, I will make sure it does, but I will ask that question and I will write to him with a fuller answer.

Turning to organs, we have discussed that there are around 6,000 people waiting for an organ transplant, of whom 34% are from a black or Asian background. That illustrates the disparity, given that only 6% of deceased donors were from those backgrounds. There is a real challenge to ensure that we are able to save all the lives we can through transplant. We have a big campaign designed to improve the rates of organ donation.

We estimate that if the private Member’s Bill from the hon. Member for Coventry North West successfully passes through Parliament, it will save an additional 200 lives a year. That is not to be sniffed at. As a Health Minister, I would be failing in my duty if I did not do everything I possibly could to secure the passage of that Bill, and I will do that. But that does not alter the fact that we still need more black and Asian people to agree to go on the register. We are working on a number of tools to address people’s real concerns, whether they are about faith, belief or heritage. We need to be able to produce materials that attack misconceptions but do so in an extremely sensitive way to those who will react to them.

Again, I encourage all Members to get involved in helping us to develop those tools and in spreading those messages as best they can. We have a library of resources that are specifically tailored to particular communities, but I am always open to any suggestions for what more we can do, because ultimately this is a very serious injustice that we need to tackle. I have a very large black African Christian community in my constituency, so I am used to engaging with them, having these debates and encouraging them to sign up to the register. We can all do that.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bedford and to all hon. Members who have shown support for this debate. I am under no illusion about the challenge here, but I am very heartened to see that so many Members recognise that this is a problem and are taking positive steps to do something about it. Those are the ingredients for success, but I will not be complacent—this is a tough one for us to tackle. I thank all donors, whether of blood, stem cells or organs, for everything that they have done to save people’s lives.

Question put and agreed to.
British Flora: Protection from Imported Diseases

4.30 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the protection of British flora from imported diseases.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I am extremely grateful to have been granted this debate, particularly as this is such a pertinent issue; the Forestry Commission recently stated: “The threat to our forests and woodlands has never been greater.”

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and former Mayor of London pledged that 2 million trees would be planted in London between 2009 and 2025. By 2012, I understand only 100,000 had been planted. The current Mayor, Sadiq Khan, promised before his election in May 2016 to plant 2 million trees in his first term, but for some unknown and unwise reason, he abandoned that policy just five months later, in October 2016. Can the Minister cast light on any of that? Can any pressure be brought to bear on all our city mayors to plant more trees? Should that not form part of the Government’s plans to tackle pollution, particularly in our inner cities?

UK imports of live plants have increased by 71% since 1999. There are now more than 1,000 pests and diseases on the UK plant health register. The Royal Horticultural Society has, however, clamped down on imports. All imported semi-mature trees will be held in isolation for 12 months before they are planted at RHS gardens and shows, and evaluation of plant health risk will be incorporated into judging criteria at RHS flower shows. Services relating to our almost 9.3 million acres of forests, woodlands and other trees are estimated to have an annual value of £44.9 billion to the UK economy. Such services include wood processing, recreation and landscaping, as well as biodiversity.

In my part of the world, the beautiful county of Devon in south-west England, a number of diseases have already been found in trees, including phytophthora ramorum, a fungus-like pathogen called a water mould, which has infected large trees widely grown in the UK for the timber market and rhododendrons. Phytophthora ramorum causes extensive damage and death to a large number of trees and other plants.

Red band needle blight, which particularly affects the Corsican pine, is found in most parts of the UK. A five-year moratorium on the planting of the species has been established for Forestry Commission plantations. Here I pay tribute to a fellow Devonian, Sir Harry Studholme, who does such important work as chairman of the Forestry Commission.

Ash dieback is an extremely serious disease of ash trees caused by a fungus. It causes wilting leaves and crown dieback, most usually leading to tree death. Ash dieback was discovered in Devon by the county council, and in February 2016, Natural Devon published a strategy entitled, “Devon ash dieback action plan: an overarching plan to identify and address the risks of ash dieback disease in Devon.” The plan states that there are more than 1.9 million ash trees in Devon, and goes on to say:

“Today we probably have more such trees because many hedges have been permitted to develop into tree lines. The 2012 estimate of nearly half a million roadside ash trees bigger than about 7.5 cm in diameter...confirms that the 1.9 million figure represents only larger trees, and that the true number of non-woodland ash in the county is much greater.”

Finally, sweet chestnut blight was discovered in Devon in December 2016. It is a plant disease caused by the ascomycete fungus, which causes death and dieback in sweet chestnut plants. Restrictions are in place in Devon on the movement of sweet chestnut material.

All of that comes on the back of the change to our landscape. We all remember the devastation that Dutch elm disease caused to the English countryside in the late 1960s and 1970s. That in turn preceded the unprecedented storm of 1987, which uprooted and killed so much woodland. It is unthinkable that we might lose any more of our flora. Act we must.

However, we must give the Government credit here. The Minister will make his remarks later, but I welcome some of the actions taken by the Government and his Department, not least under the stewardship of my former boss in the Northern Ireland Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), when he was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am extremely pleased to see him in his place. I believe he intends to catch your eye later, Sir Henry.

The appointment in 2014 of Professor Nicola Spence as a chief plant health officer was a huge step forward. She has invested £4.5 million in new patrols and inspectors, which hopefully will stem the flow of diseases entering the United Kingdom. I also very much welcome the appointment this month of Sir William Worsley as the Government’s tree champion. That appointment meets one of the key commitments in the Government’s 25-year environment plan.

Sir William’s task of driving forward planting rates will help raise awareness of the impact our flora have on our planet. Such action by Government will teach us all further about the impact that diseases have on our environment and our economy. When the Minister gets to his feet, I hope he will confirm that Sir William will be fully resourced—or is he to be just another Government task with no power? How will his success be measured?

Will he have full access to Ministers? I hope to hear positive answers to those key questions on the role of our excellent new tree champion.

I also very much welcome the work of the Action Oak partnership, supported by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, a man who is always ahead of the curve on all matters environmental. The partnership will, among other things, fund research to improve the understanding of the threats to our oak trees and inform best management practices. I understand that it is looking to raise £15 million. Can the Minister confirm how much has been raised since its launch at last year’s Chelsea flower show and say whether the Government will make a financial contribution to that important project?

One of the common threats is xylella from continental Europe. I pay tribute to Country Life magazine and the RHS for bringing it to my attention. Xylella has not yet reached our shores, but it could pose a severe threat to our flora if it does. It was found in the United States, Taiwan and Italy, where it has destroyed olive groves in the southern part of the country. Subsequently, it has been discovered in Spain, Germany and France, along with...
some of the Baltic states. According to Mark Griffiths in *Country Life*, the EU's reaction to xylella has been "authoritarian"; its vectors have been "subjected to mass insecticide, an action that has turned plant disease into an ecological disaster", through a policy of fighting the disease by eradicating everything that might possibly succumb to it.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the reasons for many of these diseases reaching us are twofold: climate change and the movement of people? Her Majesty's Government should understand that it is in our economic, social and environmental interest to have as much early warning as possible of such diseases moving up through Europe. Does he agree that we should require our embassies and other agencies to give much earlier warnings as diseases approach, so that we on these islands can develop strategies to tackle them before they get here?

Sir Hugo Swire: My right hon. Friend is precisely right. Forewarned is forearmed, and the more we can publicise these impending diseases coming to our islands, the better. He will acknowledge, as a former Environment Minister, that in some respects the problem is already here. It is about how we stop it from spreading and try to contain it where we can. He has a record second to none on environmental matters, and I am extremely pleased that he is here and taking an interest in the debate.

This rather follows on from what my right hon. Friend said: there have been reports that if the British Government were presented with the problem of xylella, they would destroy not only the infected plant, but all plants within a 100-metre radius. I am concerned that that would amount to uprooting parks, gardens and the greenery of entire neighbourhoods. I would appreciate it if the Minister could confirm what action the Government would take in the event of a xylella outbreak in the UK, and what precautions he is taking to prevent such an outbreak.

As in many of our discussions nowadays, the Commonwealth has its part to play, with the invention of the Queen's Commonwealth canopy. That initiative, which aims to involve all 53 Commonwealth countries and was first conceived by, among others, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), will hopefully save one of the world's most important natural habitats, forests. Three UK projects are involved: Epping forest, Wentwood in Wales and the national forest, which covers parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. Those of us who saw it enjoy the ITV documentary in April, "The Queen's Green Planet", with the legendary Sir David Attenborough, in which Her Majesty the Queen and Sir David discussed the importance of the Queen's Commonwealth canopy. I particularly look forward to planting a tree in the name of the canopy in Devon in the near future. Will the Minister say what the British Government are doing to raise awareness of and support this Commonwealth initiative?

That leads me on to the defining issue that the United Kingdom faces: leaving the European Union. I am well aware that there is a small amount of irony in the fact that while this debate is about indigenous British flora, many trees and plants in this country are not originally from these shores. Indeed, without our great plant-gatherers of the 18th and 19th centuries, we would not be enjoying many of the trees, shrubs and plants that we have come to know and love. However, I believe that we have a real chance to deliver a green Brexit by ensuring that trading incentives are used to improve biosecurity in trade, including green trade deals. We have a chance to be a pioneering force in having the greenest possible free trade deals, and I hope the Minister will have a positive view of that suggestion.

I commend the millennium seed bank at the royal botanic gardens, Kew, which achieved its initial aim of storing seeds from all the UK’s native plant species in 2009, making Britain the first country in the world to have preserved its botanical heritage. The current phase of the millennium seed bank project is to conserve a quarter of the world’s plant species by 2020. I hope that the Commonwealth, and in particular the Queen’s Commonwealth canopy, will help with the project through their extensive global contacts, and that the British Government will support those efforts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), what instructions can be issued to our embassies and high commissions around the world to identify the threats to the United Kingdom, and some of those plants and trees, to prevent people from trying to export them to the UK?

I am much heartened by the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee’s inquiry on plant and animal biosecurity after Brexit. Will the Government implement the Committee’s recommendations when the report is published, if they are in line with the stated ambition under the 25-year environment strategy and the tree health resilience strategy?

I could go on much longer on this extraordinary subject, but those with greater knowledge of the subject wish to contribute to the debate. I will conclude by saying that many of us spend our recreational time walking the British countryside. It is the envy of the world. How distraught would we be if it were to be further decimated by diseases that killed our flora? I call on us all to act now to protect our green and pleasant land.

4.44 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and a great honour to follow my ex-Minister of State in Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). We worked very closely together. He made a fine speech, and I congratulate him on bringing this important issue before us. I put on the record that I am delighted that the Minister for Agriculture,
Fisheries and Food will answer the debate. He also served under me, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who was a junior Minister while I was at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am among friends.

When I came to DEFRA, I set the Department four simple priorities over a kaleidoscopic variety of responsibilities. The first was to grow the rural economy. The second was to improve the environment—not protect it, but improve it. The third was to protect the country from animal disease. The fourth, which is relevant to the debate, was to protect the country from plant disease. Little did I know when I came to DEFRA what I was about to walk into.

Back in 1992, Chalara fraxinea had been found in Poland and was decimating ash trees there. It later struck me—my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury made a pertinent observation on this—how extraordinary it was that our embassies and consulates were not reading horticultural magazines and reporting back. If we had known then what was about to come to us, we could possibly have done more about it.

However, this terrible disease, which will ravage the 80 million-odd ash trees in this country, came west, probably not helped by the foolish practice of sending seedlings to Holland and then bringing them back as whips and saplings to grow into full trees here. Shortly before I went to DEFRA, the disease was found in a nursery in Buckinghamshire during a routine inspection by the Food and Environment Research Agency, and by the autumn, shortly after I took over, we were in a full-blooded crisis, in which we were trying to handle the issue.

We saw immediately that the disease had clearly followed the Schmallenberg virus, which had blown in, according to the maps, to the eastern tip of Kent and of East Anglia. However—this was unprecedented for DEFRA—we then had a most extraordinary exercise in which, over a week, we mapped the whole country, with amazing co-operation from the public and voluntary organisations and the devolved Administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I also very much pay tribute to the Republic of Ireland, which played a part in this. We established spots of Chalara infection where trees had quite clearly been unwisely brought in from the continent. That immediately set in train the need to set about doing something.

It seemed crazy to me that we had a chief vet, but did not really have anyone in charge of tree and plant health, so I commissioned Professor Chris Gilligan, professor of mathematical biology and head of the school of biological sciences at the University of Cambridge, to chair the tree health and plant biosecurity expert taskforce, which we set up—all helped by Professor Boyd, the chief scientist at DEFRA. The taskforce produced a really good report.

My speech will be quite brief, because I would really like the Minister to reply—I tipped him off about this yesterday—on how many of the report’s key points have been implemented. The taskforce’s final report came out in May 2013, and DEFRA produced a plant biosecurity strategy in April 2014 that adopted nearly all the key recommendations, the first of which was to set up a UK risk register.

Are there still monthly meetings at DEFRA? I chaired meetings with my chief vet and the newly appointed chief plant health officer at which we monitored all diseases coming towards this country, and those that were already here, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon has rightly mentioned. Those were really valuable meetings.

The other key recommendation, which we adopted very early on after receiving the taskforce’s interim report, was to appoint a chief plant health officer; as I said, we had a chief vet but not an equivalent in plant health. We rapidly appointed Professor Nicola Spence. She had been a visiting professor at Harper Adams University, which is near my constituency, and is very distinguished. We put her in post, and I remember our benefiting very quickly: as soon as she was appointed, there was a case of a shipment of, I think, heavy electrical plant cables from Turkey. The dunnage—the wooden packing—was infested with some form of insect that was very unwelcome in this country. Professor Spence asked what to do, and I told her to send it back. We sent it back, which I said would send a striking lesson to the whole industry that, now that she had been appointed, I would back her all the way.

That is why the monthly meetings were really important. We would discuss these individual cases, and sightings of diseases—both plant and animal—in distant countries and here. I would like reassurances that those meetings are going on.

We also talked about getting much better intelligence. That was one of the key recommendations. On that front, I went to Russia, primarily to promote exports at a big Russian food exhibition. I visited the really interesting and top-class Russian institute for plant health, which had amazing, state-of-the-art facilities. We agreed with the Minister that we would have regular meetings of scientists and, once a year, a ministerial meeting. Many of these diseases have come from east to west, Chalara being the most obvious one. It would be nice to know that we have kept up those meetings.

While we were in Moscow, Martin Ward, who was chief plant officer at DEFRA, was elected chairman of the European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organisation, on which there are 50 countries; it goes well beyond the EU. I would like to know what our contacts are with that organisation, because I thought that was a thoroughly worthwhile body to be part of and keep beefed-up. Martin Ward was a key man when he was in DEFRA and did a great job. I hoped that we would pick up a lot more intelligence there about where the diseases were coming from. We were going to look at procedures for preparedness. For instance, we planted 250,000 saplings to stake out and see where there might be resistance to Chalara; we found that that was in a tiny percentage of trees. The tragedy of all that was that we could have done so much work, if we had known back in 1992 that this disease was out there. I would like to know what other programmes DEFRA has embarked on.

There was going to be much tighter protection of borders. Around the same time, I went to Australia and New Zealand. I was absolutely stunned by the incredibly vigorous measures taken there. I remember seeing second-hand JCBs being stripped down and steam-cleaned at Sydney port before being allowed entry. No mud or
debate on a really worthwhile subject.

area, and in training in plant diseases; we were going to
increase skills and get more people interested in this
where we are up to. Lastly, we promised we would
want to hear from the Minister. I would like a résumé of
that had been blighted.

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I had hoped we could begin to develop healthy plants
and they have a massive interest: think of the tragedy of
that after Brexit. We will be able to run and control our
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Interestingly, in its latest publication, Buglife goes so far
than me, but we need free trade in healthy products.

the House of Commons more in favour of free trade
It was originally imported from the Netherlands.

been found in a pot plant in a garden centre in Oxfordshire.
It was originally imported from the Netherlands.

As you know, Sir Henry, you will not find anyone in
the House of Commons more in favour of free trade
than me, but we need free trade in healthy products.
Interestingly, in its latest publication, Buglife goes so far
as to say that we should ban all pot plant imports,
which would be a very strong measure. In DEFRA, we
were looking at much more vigorous quarantining.
Some of these imports are mad; for example, bringing
from south-east Asia a reasonably mature tree with half
a tonne of earth on it is just inviting trouble. Even the
smallest pot plants can include a few eggs. We were
going to look at longer quarantine periods, so that the
bugs could incubate, and then have much more vigorous
measures for sending them back. We will be able to do
that after Brexit. We will be able to run and control our
own borders.

I hope that the UK will become a haven for healthy
plant products. I want to say the British Isles, because
we worked extremely closely with the Government of
the Republic of Ireland. They were really co-operative,
and they have a massive interest: think of the tragedy of
the decimation of ash populations across northern Europe.
I had hoped we could begin to develop healthy plants
and repopulate. We could be a reservoir of healthy
plants that could be used to repopulate parts of Europe
that had been blighted.

Other Members want to speak, and we very much
want to hear from the Minister. I would like a résumé of
where we are up to. Lastly, we promised we would
increase skills and get more people interested in this
area, and in training in plant diseases. We were going to
put more money into that. I heartily congratulate my
right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon on this
debate on a really worthwhile subject.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I plan to start
the wind-ups at five past five, which leaves us exactly
10 minutes. I would be grateful if the hon. Member for
Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member
for Newbury (Richard Benyon) would split the time
between them.

4.56 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will adhere to the
five-minute limit, Sir Henry. First, I congratulate the
right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on
presenting the case so well. He said others with expertise
would speak after him, but he spoke at the beginning
with a lot of expertise, as did the right hon. Member for
North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), and we appreciate
that. I have not held any of the positions that the right
hon. Gentlemen used to hold, but I come as an MP from
Northern Ireland, so perhaps that gets me into the club.
I am not sure whether it does or not, but there we are. It
is always a pleasure to speak on these issues. In his
introduction, the right hon. Member for East Devon
referred to the beauty of his constituency, but my
constituency of Strangford, which the right hon. Gentleman
has visited on numerous occasions, is equal to his, if not
better.

The issue of protection for our habitats is something
that I have a great interest in. Whenever I get off the
plane from Heathrow to Belfast City, the advertising on
the walls clearly states, “No plants and no food”. It is
very strict. That is what we see displayed at Belfast
International airport, Belfast City airport and also
Londonderry airport, so it is clear that we have a policy
in place.

On my farm I have planted some 3,500 trees and
created duck ponds. My sons and I are fastidious about
pest control to encourage a thriving fauna haven, and I
am not alone, as many country sports enthusiasts have
the same passion for conservation and the issue of
protection, as does the right hon. Gentleman. I was
pleased to learn that there would be tighter controls on
importing plants to prevent pests and diseases from
damaging our native trees. The right hon. Gentleman
has said that, and I will say it from a Northern Ireland
perspective.

We have had numerous ash dieback outbreaks in
Northern Ireland, some in my constituency. In Ballywalter,
not too far away, Lord Dunleath’s estate has had an
outbreak in the past. Oak and ash trees are among the
species at risk from imported diseases and pests such as
xylella and the emerald ash borer beetle. Xylella was first
detected in 2013 when it destroyed olive trees in southern
Italy. It spread to France, Spain and Mediterranean
islands. It could arrive in Britain in imported plants
such as rosemary, lavender, olives, oleander and almond.

In my constituency, Japanese knotweed is a major
issue with people not understanding that trying to pull
it out or cut it down merely spreads the problem. We
must do more to educate people about the dangers of
dealing with foreign plants, along with our own. Although
the nurturing of Japanese bonsai trees for 50 years is a
lovely thought, try dealing with Japanese knotweed that
attacks plants and undermines the very foundations of
homes and buildings throughout the Province. Japanese
knotweed has become a real problem in my constituency
around some of the houses, and land has been blighted.
An area in the centre of Newtownards cannot be developed
for six years because of the presence of Japanese knotweed. Weed killing has been undertaken, but a period of time has to be allowed to make sure that the incubation has not arisen again.

When I tried to help a constituent address their knotweed issue, I ran into problem after problem with Government Departments unwilling to step in and stop the spread. Instead of one garden being sprayed by a specialist at the right time of year for the prescribed time, a row of houses is now literally infested and losing their plants, and possibly their foundations. We were told that the weed killer was reasonably priced and the constituent could do the job themselves, but that did not really work. We need a targeted effort from Government Departments and the local councils to address the diseases and stop them destroying our beautiful UK.

I want to ask the Minister a quick question. There is a farmers’ market event today in the Members’ Dining Room, and I spoke to some of the people there. Different regions of the United Kingdom are represented, including Northern Ireland. I understand that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland have a cross-border body that involves the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other Government bodies. However, although the framework is in place, there is no financial assistance for that cross-border body so that it can move forward and address the issue of invasive species coming to Northern Ireland, but also to the Republic. We need to dedicate funding to that purpose for the greater good of all our plants and fauna. I ask the Minister whether there is any intention to widen the attack on the invaders in our gardens.

I fully support the Department’s decision to implement stricter controls, yet it is a matter of closing the gate after the horse has bolted—we have all these foreign invaders already attacking our trees and wildlife and we must defend them. That needs to be targeted and done on a UK-wide basis. Across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we need to encourage the growth of our own beautiful plants and wildlife, free from attack by other plants that have no right to be thriving on our shores.

5 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be involved in this very important and timely debate. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I should also say that I am a trustee of a charity called Plantlife, which is doing a lot of work on invasive species and plant health and trying to encourage wildflowers.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), a former Secretary of State, said, invasive species are costing our economy at least £1.7 billion a year. I remember the plant retailers coming to me, when I was in his Department, to whinge about the increased biosecurity measures that he was rightly implementing. I listened to them, but I am afraid that I just said to them, “Look, you really have got this wrong. Your industry is in part responsible for a devastating effect on our natural environment. You have to face facts: we are now moving into almost a military-style campaign to attack the invasive species and the diseases that are coming to this country, and you have to wise up to it.” They were quite shocked, but I was in turn quite shocked at their lack of biosecurity over decades, at the failure of Governments over decades to implement proper biosecurity, and how we were happy to import nearly all the stock of young trees of certain species that we were planting.

As my right hon. Friend said, we have followed the progression of Chalara as, like Schmallenberg disease and blue tongue, it has progressed across the country. At the weekend, I was looking at a wood in Berkshire and I estimated that about one third of the canopy was ash, and that will be gone in a very short space of time. We can learn from this. We can prevent other diseases that could be devastating to the remaining stock of trees and plants, if we learn from our mistakes in the past. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) is absolutely right to say that.

I hope that the Minister will, in his reply, comment on Action Oak, which is spearheaded by Woodland Heritage. It is based quite near Alice Holt forest, and there is good reason why it should be there and able to build on the information at that centre of excellence. But funding is the key. We welcome the £500,000 that DEFRA promised, but £15 million is needed, and it would be great to know how close we are to getting to that.

Plantlife has identified what it calls its dirty dozen of invasive species, including American skunk-cabbage, broad-leaved bamboo, giant rhubarb, cotoneasters, Himalayan balsam, the Hottentot fig and Japanese knotweed. These invasive species are not only causing huge environmental damage, but creating a huge cost for us to deal with. What my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire did at DEFRA was quite right. He applied a logistician’s approach. I can remember that as a result of foot and mouth, when we had a very serious drought—this was before he was Secretary of State—we developed the same concept as was applied at the time of foot and mouth. It was called birtable meetings. All the experts were brought in on a regular basis. They were very executive: they were called birtable meetings because no one sat down—rather like the Privy Council—people just got the business done and met everyone went away and got on with it. I think that that kind of approach is required now to deal with this issue.

Of course, one measure that we need to talk about is husbandry. If dealing with Chalara requires the ash tree to be cut down and burned or taken away, or just cut down at the first sign, that is easy for a larger state or an organisation such as the Forestry Commission, but it is hard for a small farmer or someone with a few ash trees in their garden. Who will take responsibility for encouraging people to do the right thing? It requires a logistician’s approach to dealing with it.

We should beware easy solutions. I remember people coming to see me and saying that we should spray acres of woodland with copper sulphate. Instead of listening to those people, who seemed to have lifted their solutions off the internet, I listened much more readily to the chief scientific adviser at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who said that that would have a much more malignant effect on our biodiversity and plant life.
5.6 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up for the Scottish National party with you in the Chair, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate and on his speech, which I will come to. Given the subject of the debate, it would be remiss of me not to put on record my congratulations to Mairi Gougeon MSP on her nomination to the Scottish Government as the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment. It is a nomination because it is the practice in Scotland that Government nominations to ministerial office must be passed by Parliament. One of her early introductions might be to read the Hansard of this debate to get a sense of some of the challenges that she will face in her job, not least from the likes of ash dieback.

The right hon. Gentleman made a typically forthright and challenging speech to the Minister. He spoke of the rate of planting trees elsewhere in these isles, but he did not mention that Scotland created 73% of all new woodland in the UK in 2016-17. Its target is now 15,000 hectares of new woodland by 2024-25, which is ambitious but achievable.

The right hon. Gentleman obviously spoke about ash dieback, which is a considerable problem in Scotland. Some 20% of all 10 km grid squares in Scotland have confirmed ash dieback. It appears that some ash trees may have some tolerance or resistance to infection, so it would be interesting for scientists to get to the bottom of how that came about. I take the point that mistakes were made in how we targeted prevention, but we need to ensure that a new strain of ash trees can be bred for the future.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about xylella, which I understand is the subject of EU emergency measures to control the movement of affected species such as plane, elm and oak. He also posed some questions to the Minister about strategy should it arrive in this country. He made a forthright and knowledgeable speech, to which I am sure the Minister will seek to respond.

The speech by the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) was obviously partly influenced by his time in ministerial office and the knowledge he gained there. He also posed several questions to the Minister, and we look forward to hearing the answers.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of his contribution to the flora of Northern Ireland. He rightly spoke about the pervasive problem of Japanese knotweed, which is a horrendous issue. From personal experience of constituency cases in Airdrie and Shotts, I know that it is expensive and challenging to deal with. The right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) described a military-style campaign, and that is exactly what is often required to deal with Japanese knotweed. It is a horrendous issue. He also spoke of the major challenges of ash dieback, and not just for larger organisations. He rightly emphasised the challenges faced by smaller landowners in ensuring that they can respond if an outbreak sadly arrives in their area.

I should mention briefly some of the areas that we are working on in Scotland. Plant health is at the heart of Scotland’s thriving natural environment, our rural economy and our wellbeing. The aim of the Scottish plant health strategy is to safeguard agriculture, horticulture, forestry and the wider environment from plant pests, from 2016 to 2021 and beyond.

One of the greatest threats to biodiversity worldwide is invasive non-native species. That threat is particularly pronounced for fragile island ecosystems—I am not just talking about the British Isles, but the islands within the British Isles. Disease has already been spoken about by the right hon. Member for East Devon and the hon. Member for Strangford, and I think particularly of Japanese knotweed.

Scotland has led the way in the UK in creating a statutory framework to prevent the introduction and spread of non-invasive species, but we have concerns about the UK Government’s Brexit strategy and the power grab, including over environmental protections. We are not opposed to UK-wide frameworks when they are in Scotland’s interests. However, they must be agreed rather than imposed, and they must happen in a manner that respects and recognises devolution. The Scottish First Minister has been clear that any threat to Scotland’s distinctive and ambitious approach to environmental standards and climate change would be completely unacceptable. Imposing a UK framework could result in substantial damage to the work that has already been done by the Scottish Government.

For example, we used EU rules to ban genetically modified crops in Scotland to protect our environment and support Scottish agriculture, and there is no such ban in England. A UK-wide framework in that area could see the ban lifted, thereby threatening Scotland’s clean, green brand and the future of Scotland’s £14 billion food and drink sector. Scotland has gained international recognition for our work on climate change and the circular economy, so we clearly do not want to put that at risk.

5.12 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate. Biosecurity is a huge issue that does not often get its turn in the spotlight.

The right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) all made important points. I share their concerns about the problems we have with the many invasive species. In our village, we have had to deal with Japanese knotweed, and we have huge issues with Himalayan balsam. Until I was elected to this place, I had a personal mission against Himalayan balsam encroaching on to our land, which I have now handed over to my husband. Removing invasive species is a terribly difficult, time-consuming and costly exercise. There is then the dreadful problem of dealing with diseases such as ash dieback, which we have also discussed.
Biosecurity is terribly critical but perhaps does not get enough attention. It is also vital for our biosecurity that we retain access to EU markets. We have to make sure that the right resources and infrastructure are in place to handle the continued movement of animals and plants. We need our trade with the EU to continue to be as frictionless as possible. Most importantly, regulatory standards must not be compromised by Brexit.

The right hon. Member for North Shropshire said that we need to trade in healthy plants and I could not agree with him more.

Prospect recently submitted evidence to an inquiry by the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee into biosecurity, recommending better training for plant health officers, an issue that has already been mentioned. We need to establish a viable training programme for new and established inspectors, plus joint training ventures with the Horticultural Trades Association and the Royal Horticultural Society. The evidence also recommends more long-term investment in agricultural and environmental science, as well as that Ministers should put together a plan to deliver future biosecurity collaboration with the EU post-Brexit.

There are significant worries that we may weaken biosecurity protection and open ourselves up to risks and threats through trade deals, unless we do everything we can to ensure that sufficient checks and resources are put in place to mitigate those risks. Brexit could mean the end of shared biosecurity information—such as that provided through the European rapid alert system for food and feed, and through the European Union notification system for plant health interceptions—for the intercepting of pests and diseases on imported goods.

We are at the end of a huge plant supply chain from other EU states. This could be significant for the future of British biosecurity. The current system of sharing intelligence of biosecurity threats within or bordering the EU must continue in some form. Given the volume of UK-EU trade, it is critical that we continue to collaborate. The cost of dealing with pests and pathogens once they are in the UK is significantly more expensive and much more challenging than preventing their introduction in the first place, as has been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members. That shared expertise is vital to being able to plan and prepare for future challenges. Any loss of that integrated approach would pose a risk to UK biosecurity. Will the Minister commit to retaining the precautionary principle in implementing biosecurity legislation?

We need a closer relationship with EU standards post-Brexit, but that may not provide the protections we need in the future, because we will have to continue to update legislation and practices, to tackle any new challenges and threats as they emerge. We know that climate change is spreading pests and diseases to new locations, and new trade deals will require new supply-chain assurances and the expertise to manage those risks. New legislation also needs to be flexible enough to enable quicker reaction to new threats and to improve the move from pest eradication, to containment, to management.

Another problem is that we simply do not know how much plant material is imported from the EU every year, as it is not checked, so we do not have any idea what resources we will need to check it. Have any estimates been made of the volume of plant imports from the EU? If those imports are not checked properly, does the Minister agree that there will be risks for biosecurity?

The current assumption on checks is that they will have to happen at supermarket distribution centres, for example, because we do not have the capacity to do so at the points of entry. There is a risk that inspectors could be overwhelmed by the volume of additional inspections and therefore miss dangerous pests or diseases in other imports. To combat that, I understand that the Animal and Plant Health Agency is recruiting about 40 new inspectors and seven new mangers, which is excellent news, but it is hard to see how they can be trained in time. There has never been a requirement for training on this scale before. Will the Minister comment on that and let me know if the training is being done face to face or online, as there are clearly concerns about the issue?

Currently, non-EU imports are managed through an HMRC customs computer system. The volumes are relatively low and require advanced notice. Inspectors are asking whether that system is appropriate for EU imports and whether it could cope with additional volume. Does the Minister believe that the current HMRC plant import customs IT system will be able to deal with the imports from the EU? Has any assessment been made of that? Is a new system being designed? If so, on what basis and will it be ready in time?

I am aware that I have posed quite a number of questions to the Minister and I appreciate that he may not be able to answer them all today. If that is the case, I would be grateful if he would write to me with the answers.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate.

As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, protecting our country from pests and diseases is vital to safeguarding our environment. The loss of veteran trees, some of which have been around for hundreds of years, due to some of those diseases, is particularly tragic. I remember as a boy growing up in Cornwall that we had beautiful elms right around the farm. I can remember my father having to cut them down, year after year, because they had died. It was a tremendous tragedy, and since then threats to plant health have only increased. That is why, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, we have to be constantly on our guard and strengthen our responses.

My right hon. Friend highlighted in his comprehensive speech many of the current threats. As he pointed out, we have the problem of ash dieback, which prompted changes to our plans some years ago. In the west country we have a particular problem, as he said, with phytophthora ramorum, which is particularly prevalent in areas of the country with wet conditions and species that are prone to that disease. We have, with our iconic oaks, the problem of oak processiory moth and acute oak decline, which has been around for a number of years. As he pointed out, recently in his part of the
world we have seen the arrival of sweet chestnut blight. In addition, we are now monitoring and are vigilant against threats, including xylella at the top of the list, and it would be a major threat to some of our trees in urban areas such as London, and the emerald ash borer.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who was the first Secretary of State who led it in my post in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—I think we are now on to Secretary of State No. 4—asked a very specific question with, I have to say, a hint of scepticism in his voice. He wanted to know whether the recommendations of the tree health and plant biosecurity initiative expert taskforce, which he commissioned and which reported in 2014, had been implemented. He will be delighted to know that those recommendations have been implemented, and many of the important changes that he put in place are still with us today. In fact, we have built on some of the architecture and infrastructure that he put in place.

For instance, we now have a chief plant health officer; indeed, Nicola Spence, our current chief plant health officer, is here today listening to the debate. We have also developed a prioritised UK risk register, which has in the region of 1,000 pests registered on it. We have strengthened governance arrangements. My right hon. Friend asked—with, I think, an especial hint of scepticism—whether our monthly biosecurity meetings, which he used to chair, continue. Perhaps he thought that they had fallen by the wayside after he had gone, as meetings often do. I reassure him that that monthly biosecurity meeting is critical and still takes place. He will be delighted to know that my noble Friend Lord Gardiner, who leads on that element of the DEFRA portfolio, is every bit as tenacious as he was in identifying threats and ensuring that we take them seriously.

The fourth recommendation was that there should be improved border security and strengthened import regulations, which I will deal with a little later. The final recommendation was that there should be a new plant health information portal. We have introduced all those recommendations and taken them further.

As a result of the biosecurity strategy launched in 2014, the plant health service now operates, pre-border, things such as systematic screening of risk, at-the-border checks—inspections at entry points—and also an inland strategy that uses both aerial and ground surveillance to reduce the risk of pests and diseases entering the country, and to manage the impact of established pests.

Turning first to the pre-border checks, we try to stop pests and diseases before they even arrive, and our international horizon scanning helps us spot new risks and take action to stop them. Risks are tracked through a fully published UK plant health risk register, which, as I have said, now has more than 1,000 plant pests and diseases registered on it. Where necessary, we take action to drive up international biosecurity standards, ensuring that regulations are robust in both Europe and beyond. For instance, we secured stronger EU-wide protections against the threat of xylella.

Turning to the border, we have invested more than £4.5 million to strengthen our border security, recruiting new plant inspectors and enhancing training. Our border inspectors carry out more than 100,000 document checks and 30,000 physical checks a year of consignments deemed to be of higher risk. They are highly effective in comparison with their peers, so the UK consistently makes more interceptions of harmful organisms than any other EU member state. In fact, the interceptions we make account for about 40% of the total number of interceptions that take place at EU level.

Jim Shannon: I referred earlier to the fact that there is a skeletal body in place in Northern Ireland and the Republic—it involves the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and others from the Republic of Ireland—but it has no funding. I do not expect the Minister to have all the answers—that would be unfair—but will he come back to me with an answer about the funding, so that we can get it going?

George Eustice: I was going to try to touch on that; it was on the long list of issues that I wanted to cover. There is already an all-Ireland approach to plant health between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and we co-operate closely with the Republic of Ireland on plant health. For instance, we invite it to the UK plant health co-ordination meeting. A lot of joint working takes place in that regard.

In 2016, some 445 different pests were intercepted and identified at UK points of entry; in 2017, the figure was 401. We cannot eliminate all the risks, but we have robust contingency plans in place so that we can take prompt, effective action to tackle the pests and diseases that make it through. In February 2017 we published the generic contingency plan for plant and bee health, which sets out how the DEFRA chief plant health officer will co-ordinate and lead the response to an outbreak of pests or diseases in plants or bees in England.

We also have ongoing extensive aerial and ground-based surveillance programmes, including Observatree, a nationwide network of more than 200 volunteer surveyors trained by the Forestry Research agency and the Woodland Trust. We have increased national protection at home by introducing statutory notification schemes for certain tree species and securing protected zones, which prevent the import of trees that do not meet stringent conditions. A protected zone effectively bans the import of trees unless they have been grown in an area free of the relevant disease and are accompanied by a plant passport certifying that. We have introduced more protected zones than any other member state. Since the introduction of statutory notification schemes for imports, there has also been a significant reduction in the number of tree imports. For instance, we have seen a 60% reduction in plane tree imports.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon raised the issue of budget, which is obviously important. There is a £37 million budget for tree health between 2012 and 2020, which has been spent on research, monitoring, risk assessment, surveillance and management and will support the priorities of our tree health resilience strategy. He also asked about Sir William Worsley, our new tree champion. I know the budget is being discussed and any budget he needs will be funded out of the provision we have for tree health, alongside other priorities. Having that tree champion has been an important step forward.
Both my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon raised the issue of the Action Oak programme, which was launched only recently by my noble Friend Lord De Mauley. We have made progress with it: so far, £1.6 million has been raised towards it. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire raised the issue of border controls. This week, we are running a “Don’t Risk It” campaign, with visible posters and information for the public.

Finally, on the issue of the European Union—no debate in this place is complete without contemplating what might happen with Brexit—leaving the EU is an opportunity to examine all our national biosecurity measures, to ensure that they are as robust as possible and that we are doing everything we can to protect our country. We are working to secure the best EU exit deal, balancing frictionless trade in plants with robust protection against pests and diseases from day one, but certainly there will be opportunities as we leave the EU to adopt a slightly different approach where we deem it necessary to protect our trees and promote plant health in this country.

Sir Hugo Swire: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members from the Conservative party, the Scottish National party and the Democratic Unionist party, and the rather lonely spokesman for the Opposition Labour party, for taking part in this debate. It is a subject that I would have thought would interest hon. Members from all over the country, and I hope that when we debate these matters in future, as I am sure we will, we will have greater representation. I think we are all agreed, in a rare form of consensus, that this is a serious problem and one that we need to get a grip on if we are to preserve our landscape for future generations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the protection of British flora from imported diseases.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 June 2018

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

Transforming Rehabilitation

SELECT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. I remind Members to turn all electronic devices to silent. For the benefit of Mr Seely, Members may now remove their jackets.

Robert Neill will speak on the publication of the ninth report of the Justice Committee, “Transforming Rehabilitation”, for up to 10 minutes; during his speech, no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Robert Neill to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief.

1.31 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. In a different context, in weather like this many of us might have been told that we could remove our wigs, rather than our jackets. We do not have to do that today.

It is a pleasure and an honour to present this Justice Committee report on transforming rehabilitation. It is the result of an eight-month inquiry, during which we took significant amounts of written and oral evidence from providers and users from across the probation sector on the programme initiated by the then Government in 2014-15.

The programme was a major structural reform of the probation service, of the way probation activities are delivered, and of what probation activity comprises. It had high ambitions. Its key objectives were to reduce reoffending; to open up the market in probation services, particularly to bring in more voluntary sector providers; and to do so in a way that achieved efficiency and value for money for the taxpayer. I regret to say that the result of our investigation is that we conclude that it has failed on every single one of those measures.

Let me start by explaining why. First, reoffending rates remain stubbornly high. They are still historically high, and they do not bear comparison with those of our neighbours in western Europe and other equivalent advanced democracies. They have not been improved by the reforms. Indeed, in some areas, it is clear that sentencers’ confidence in non-custodial alternatives to imprisonment has declined, rather than improved. The objective was to have a robust system of alternatives to custody. I regret to say that we conclude that that has not been achieved.

Secondly, our evidence shows that the involvement of voluntary and third-sector organisations has declined, rather than increased. There are isolated instances of good practice, but they are precisely that: isolated, patchy and frequently outweighed by the areas where the service is not delivering to the standard required.

Thirdly, the programme has not driven efficiency. Contracts were let to community rehabilitation companies on a seriously flawed financial basis. As a result, more public money, to the tune of several million pounds, has had to be pumped into those companies to keep the show on the road. That is not sustainable.

Let me set out the report’s findings in a little more detail. The contracts are important, because the purpose of the process was to split probation provision between the National Probation Service, which is still in the public sector, and the community rehabilitation companies, which are generally owned by a consortium of large outsourcing companies, the names of which we in the public sector are familiar with, with the involvement of some voluntary-sector groups—regrettably few, given what the intentions were.

The split was supposed to be based on risk: the higher-risk offenders would be supervised by the National Probation Service, and those of a lower risk would be supervised by the community rehabilitation companies. We conclude that that had two disadvantages. First, it disrupted the considerable networks that agencies had built up at a local level. Secondly, the community rehabilitation companies were often not geared up in time to take on the new responsibilities. We conclude that the introduction of the system was, frankly, rushed. There was no attempt to pilot it or do proper assessments before it was brought in. It is also clear from our evidence that risk is a crude and ineffective measure for dividing responsibilities, because an offender’s risk profile—the level of risk they pose to the public, their risk of reoffending and so on—changes over the course of their journey. That is not reflected in the way the division is currently cast.

The other very serious issue that concerns us about the contracts is this. It is clear from the evidence that the bids by the public-private sector consortiums were wildly optimistic in their financial assumptions, which were based on an assessment that the fixed cost of running the service would be about 20%. In reality, it is 60% to 70%. They could not have been further out. That meant that they were not financially sustainable, and the Government faced the prospect either of the contracts failing or of having to pump in more money. That is not a way to run a system efficiently or effectively.

We believe that there has to be more transparency about the contracts, and that the Ministry has to look again at its capacity to deal with such matters. It is clear that the robustness of the financial model was not challenged sufficiently at the beginning. That cannot be allowed to happen again.

We are not satisfied that the monitoring of the performance has achieved what was desired. A great deal of the system depends on payment by results, but we found that in practice, that does not work as an incentive to reduce reoffending. Again, it is a crude measure, not least because some of the factors that drive rehabilitation and the risk of reoffending are outside the control of the probation providers. It is not a well set-up system of reward. We believe that the Ministry of Justice should review that mechanism, just as it must look at the split. There have been attempts to
resolve the issue, but there are basic problems with data sharing, co-ordination and so on. They must be dealt with.

We must ensure that future contracts have specific targets and incentives to involve the voluntary sector properly, as was intended. The contract structure favours the big boys, because they have the resource to put in complicated framework bids, whereas smaller-scale operations frequently get squeezed out. That is the reverse of what was intended, and we believe that that needs to be changed.

Staffing morale was found to be at an all-time low in the National Probation Service and in CRCs. Staff have higher case loads than anticipated, and often feel that, because of the artificial nature of the split, they are dealing with cases for which they do not have adequate training. We think there is a need for the Ministry to publish a probation workforce strategy covering both the NPS and the CRCs.

We need to deal with the operation of the through-the-gate system—the attempt to provide people with support on release—which we find to be wholly inadequate. In the past, people got a £46 discharge grant and nothing else. Now, they appear to get a £46 discharge grant and a leaflet. The follow-up supervision is woefully inadequate. In some cases, it is a telephone call once every six weeks. That is no way to turn lives around properly. It does a disservice not only to the offender but to the public, because it increases the risk.

We also need to look at the use of custody in shorter sentences. The intention was to give sentencers confidence that they could punish by way of community orders of one kind or another. There is nothing wrong with having a punitive element in them, but they must also have rehabilitative elements. Unfortunately, because sentencers—magistrates and judges—do not have confidence that they could punish by way of community orders of 12 months or less, they appear to get a £46 discharge grant and a leaflet. The follow-up supervision is woefully inadequate. In some cases, it is a telephone call once every six weeks. That is no way to turn lives around properly. It does a disservice not only to the offender but to the public, because it increases the risk.

There are a number of other issues, which I will happily touch on if asked to by hon. Members. There is no right to stop reoffending in every case; there are exceptions. But for that to happen, the Government must put in place a robust alternative.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although this report is undoubtedly critical of the system, the evidence that we received says that the system could be put right with work, and is not in fact broken?

Robert Neill: Yes, I think that is right; I do want to be constructive. Whether or not we would have started from here is an interesting question for debate, but we are here. Turning round systems such as this is a bit like turning round an ocean liner: it takes a long time. A U-turn is not practical, it seems to us, in these circumstances. That is why we say that an urgent review by the Ministry of State is necessary right across the piece to start identifying the areas of failure and start working on them immediately. I hope that our report helps to set out for the Ministry where that work needs to be done.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Select Committee for the report, and for fully endorsing the Scottish Government policy of a presumption against short sentences of 12 months or less. Recidivism rates are at a near-20-year low in Scotland, following the introduction of the prohibition. Does the Chair of the Committee expect to see a similar reduction in reoffending in England and Wales, or are there other, underlying issues that need to be addressed first?

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. I am not sure how far the roll-out has gone so far, but we certainly believe that the move in Scotland is in the right direction, and that is evidenced by the situation in many other jurisdictions, where there has been the same effect. I would not want to be held to specific numbers, but I think that the direction of travel to which the hon. Gentleman refers would be
Robert Neill: One problem that we have, to which we refer in the report, is the lack of transparency around the contractual terms. One would expect, if there were a complete failure of performance, that there ought not to be significant payments, as with any contract, but we do refer to the tendency—it is not unique to the Ministry of Justice; it is across Government—for the excuse of commercial confidentiality to be used almost as a blanket bar to examining terms. That is why we recommend in the report that there be much more transparency around the letting or re-letting of contracts. We should certainly have more transparency about the matrix on which they are based, the financial model, the performance criteria that are built into them and the means of performance measuring of the CRCs themselves. We do not have adequate information on any of that, and I think the public are entitled to it.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank the Chairman of the Justice Committee for his excellent statement. We now move to the main business.
BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Russian Federation Activity

1.49 pm

Mr Bo Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Russian Federation activity in the UK and globally.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. This is an important issue for me and I hope that others will see it as important, too. I am thankful to those who are taking part in this debate.

One of the most significant challenges that we face in this era is the Kremlin’s political conflict against the west. It is one of our most complex problems. Western states arguably face a new kind of conflict, in which all the tools of the state, non-military as much as military, are combined in a dynamic, efficient and integrated way to achieve political effect. I have called this brief debate to seek updates from the Government on a series of issues. If the Minister will allow me, I will outline 10 ideas concisely, which I hope the Government will take on board. That does not mean that I am not supportive of Government policy at the moment. We have some down time after the immediacy of the Skripal poisoning to think more comprehensively about our relationship with the Russian Federation and its Government.

It is important to note that this is not about being anti-Russian, despite some of the nonsense that comes out of the Russian embassy and Russia Today. The friendliness of Russians to the English during the World cup, shows that the Kremlin’s hostility to the UK is not shared more widely, regardless of whether we think President Putin is a popular leader or not. The World cup, however, is proving to be a PR godsend to his regime, because elsewhere it is business as usual for the Kremlin. The same day that England beat Panama 6-1, which everyone elsewhere it is business as usual for the Kremlin. The same day that England beat Panama 6-1, which everyone was very happy about, Russian jets were in operation in southern Syria, allegedly hitting civilian targets, the war in eastern Ukraine continued and dirty money continued to flow through and to London. Critically, Russia’s slide towards an authoritarian stance is part of a trend taking place around the globe—the rise of authoritarian states, which use open societies to protect and promote their interests, as well as to damage those open societies. China, Russia and Iran, as well as non-state actors such as Hezbollah, all use a complex mix of tactics.

One of the problems for western states is that we have not had a definition of this hybrid or full-spectrum war. A month ago I presented what I think may have been the first comprehensive, peer-reviewed definition in the western world. I argued that contemporary Russian conflict appears to seek to divide and demoralise us—especially those states that border Russia—to damage the cohesion of NATO and the European Union, and potentially to break down the bonds that bind western alliances within the European Union.

Russia’s allies are doing rather well at the moment. The Freedom party in Austria and the Northern League in Italy are both in power. For me, the most important point is that it is about reorienting Russian society away from a liberal model of development—albeit a corrupt, chaotic and unsuccessful one in the 1990s—to a much more authoritarian model. We are the enemy, not only because we represent an alternative to that but because the Kremlin security establishment needs an enemy to help it to exert control over the Russian people. We see that in the daily diet of propaganda on Russian state television.

I strongly support the Government’s actions in recent months, but now that the immediacy of the Skripal case has passed, I would like to propose a series of measures, which I would be grateful if the Government would at least consider and maybe discuss with me at a time of their own convenience. First, I believe that we need to methodically expose what Russians and others are doing. In the 1970s and 1980s the United States established what it called an inter-agency active measures group, which investigated and publicised what was then known as active measures—the KGB form of subversion. As I said, that included tools such as disinformation, propaganda, assassination, support for terrorist groups, smears and espionage, running agents of influence, etc. I believe that we need to set up something similar, some kind of permanent structure to look at subversive operations against the west, the UK and our allies.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will come on to this point. Does he agree that the Electoral Commission, in responding to measures aimed at subverting democratic processes in this country, is entirely unfit for purpose, that it is an analogue regulator in a digital age, and that, in fact, we should be integrating its functions into the National Crime Agency and giving it real forensic investigatory ability, to ensure that attempts to subvert our democracy are dealt with effectively and properly?

Mr Seely: I think the hon. Gentleman is more of an expert than I am on that. I absolutely think that the strength of our electoral systems and their vulnerability is one of the critical issues. I think it is number 8 on my list, so I will come to it shortly. I am grateful for his suggestion, which goes further than what I would propose.

To wind up the first point, occasional Government statements are good, as are some excellent Select Committee reports, but I believe we need something more permanent—not something that points fingers at the Russians but something that seeks to methodically understand the way subversive operations operate in the western world. We face a new kind of political conflict from hackers, trolls, assassins, politically connected business executives and market manipulators, spin doctors, paid-for protesters and criminals, who are often more usable and useful than conventional tools of conflict. On that point about market manipulators, given the Bloomberg investigation...
earlier this week, which showed that hedge funds had been buying private polling data that effectively allowed them to front-run the Brexit vote, is it not time to initiate a parliamentary inquiry into the behaviour of those involved, especially considering statements made by some party political leaders at the time of the result, which appeared to concede defeat, despite possibly being told by their favoured pollsters that the Leave campaign would likely win? I choose my words carefully, but I think there is a prima facie case here, which is concerning.

Secondly, I believe we should introduce a list, as they have in the United States, of PR and other agents of Russian influence in the UK. Russians will have influence in this country that is clear and above board, but people who work for President Putin, one of the oligarchs, a proxy front or a third group linked to them need to be open about it and we need to have some kind of register. Perhaps that will be a voluntary thing for PR companies to do; it may be something for the Select Committees to do; but it may equally be something for Government to look at. We also need to ensure that the House of Lords has the same anti-sleaze standards as the House of Commons. It does not at the moment, and I think we can expect more scandals.

We do have a problem with Russian influence here, on both the hard right and the hard left. I have written about Seamus Milne’s mirroring of Russian lines in both the hard right and the hard left. I have written can expect more scandals.

Thirdly, we should introduce laws to ensure a health warning on broadcasters and other media that are paid-for propagandists for authoritarian states. A counter-propaganda Bill is going through Congress to do just that. Just as we have a public health warning on a packet of cigarettes, we can have some kind of public health warning on a TV channel that is a propagandistic outfit for an authoritarian state, which does not have an independent editorial line. If we shut down Russia Today or RT—or whatever it is calling itself this week—in our country, we can expect the Russians to shut down the BBC in their country and they would probably quite like an opportunity to do so. I am not suggesting that we do that. I am suggesting that TV stations that do not have an independent editorial line should be forced to advertise that fact in some way. The Countering Foreign Propaganda Bill, which is going through Congress at the moment, is potentially a model.

Fourthly, we should properly fund the BBC World Service radio and TV, and boost the Russian service more than is currently being done. We are in a battle with authoritarian states globally to promote free speech and open societies. I do not think this is a battle we should aim to lose; it is an important one to win. For me—this is a wider point—the Department for International Development should be paying all £400 million for that, as part of a fundamental rethink of what global Britain means and how we spend that 0.7%, because I do not believe that we get value for money for it at the moment.

Fifthly, we should change our visa regime to make it easier for ordinary Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians and people from that part of the world to come here, and more difficult for oligarchs, rather than the other way around. At the moment, our visa regime with too many countries rewards kleptocrats at the expense of ordinary people. I congratulate the Government, potentially, on a recent oligarch visa decision.

Sixthly, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office needs to be more active in seeing Russian influence in the round. I am sure the Minister would say that it does, but more vocality, if that is the right word—being more vocal—on Nord Stream 2 would not go amiss. I am aware of recent statements by the German leadership about oil concerns for Ukraine, but we know how the Kremlin tends to get around such promises. We also need to ensure that the Kremlin’s appalling war crimes in Syria, which are genuine, significant, serious and consistent, are recorded for history. We should work with others, if need be, to shout about it and use open-source information to highlight it.

We should also take much more interest in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee in 2016, in relation to the manipulation of the US presidential elections, which may be one of the most serious and significant cases of Kremlin and Russian espionage that we will ever witness in our lifetime. An important part of that process took place in London and probably involved Mr Julian Assange as the recipient and online publisher of the material stolen from the DNC. It is bizarre that we have not heard more from the Mueller inquiry in relation to London, because so many links seem to go through it.

I ask the Minister, and I choose my words carefully, what the current Ecuadorian Government are doing to encourage Mr Assange’s exit and an end to this process. What representations have the Government had from Jennifer Robinson or other members of his Australian, UK-Australian and UK legal team? Two Australian consular officials recently visited Mr Assange, and I am curious as to why.

What passport does Mr Assange hold? I was told that it was an Ecuadorian diplomatic one, but it may not be. I ask that because the Soviets sprang George Blake from Wormwood Scrubs in 1966 and I am aware that under the previous Ecuadorian Government, the Ecuadorian secret service looked at a series of possibilities to get Mr Assange out, including a rooftop escape by helicopter, getting lost in the crowds in Harrods—I did not know it was that popular—being smuggled out in the ambassador’s car and being made the Ecuadorian ambassador to the United Nations. I stress that there has been a change of Government in Ecuador, and I suspect those plans are no longer in the state they were before, but I would be grateful for the assurance that the Government are aware of the risks, especially in propaganda terms.

There are several potential suspects. A courier—a cut-out—was likely used to take the DNC-hacked material from the GRU, Russian military intelligence, and the Guccifer 2.0 account from Moscow to Mr Assange in London, possibly via a diplomatic pouch or a third country. Two weeks ago, James Clapper, a former director of US national intelligence, said that a suspect had been identified last year, so this is a live issue that very much relates to Russian activity in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, who is making a most interesting and powerful speech, but I want to ensure that we are not straying into anything that is sub judice.
Mr Seely: I do not believe we are—certainly not in this country.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has assured me, so that is fine.

Mr Seely: Thank you, Mr Bone. I am well aware of the point.

The suspects in this case range from the improbable to the possible. There are many Australians on the visitor logs to the embassy, which I have seen, but there is no evidence, and little reason, for those people to have been involved in handling stolen material. There have been allegations that UK politicians may have been conduits, but it should be clearly stated that again, there is no hard evidence. The Guardian has indicated several people, including a courier who has worked for Mr Assange in the past. A German gentleman who fits his description visited the embassy in late September, on the same day as the date stamp on the second DNC dump, which included the Podesta emails.

The FSB might have continued to use journalists. The first dump of DNC emails ended on 25 May, and in early June, an RT journalist, Nikolay Bogachikhin, visited the Embassy twice—a four-minute social visit, which is pretty taciturn even by Russian standards, and a slightly longer 22-minute visit on 8 June. If those were social visits, they were pretty brief. One cannot say much in four minutes, but there are probably other things one can do in that time.

Up to 80 people could be suspects, so I would be grateful if the Government could shed any light on who they believe is the culprit and whether they will encourage the US to name a suspect. I ask because the guilty parties were probably acting on behalf of the Kremlin to bring stolen material from the United States into Britain to influence the US presidential elections, which is incredibly serious.

To return to the main theme of my speech, my seventh point is that we should give Ofcom greater powers. The Latvian Government regularly complain about the content of Russian broadcasters from London who spew out propaganda in their country. Ofcom’s investigations take up to a year, while RT and Sputnik churn out a regular diet of anti-western nonsense. I do not believe that we should ban RT or Sputnik, as I have told the Minister, but we need to strengthen Ofcom’s powers, including fines and rights of reply, and ensure that it investigates broadcasters of knowingly fake or propagandistic news more quickly.

Eightly, we should use our financial and legal powers to hurt people around the Kremlin regime. Transparency International has identified £4.4 billion-worth of properties in the UK that were bought with suspicious wealth, a fifth of which was Russian. I am curious to know whether any unexplained wealth orders have been used against people from eastern Europe.

Ninthly, we need to look at conventional deterrence as well, and I am sure we will do that at the coming NATO summit, which is causing a certain amount of consternation in political and military circles in Europe because of Mr Trump’s, shall we say, erratic tweets. Russia’s political and financial dealings with the west are part of a multi-faceted strategy that runs from information warfare to military dominance of its neighbours, including dominance in tactical nuclear weapons and conventional missiles. It is part of a holistic strategy that includes military and non-military elements.

Finally, to repeat the point that the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) made, we need to understand the threat of bots and fake news to our democracy and our electoral system. We have seen how divisive disputed elections are, and one only has to look to Capitol Hill to see that Democrats want to talk about the 2016 US presidential election but Republicans definitely do not. In much the same way, Brexiteers refuse to discuss the referendum here. I voted for Brexit, and I have seen no serious and significant evidence that the referendum here was manipulated, but the time to talk about it is now—as soon as possible. Does the Minister realise how disastrous it would be for our country to have disputed elections and referendums in the same way as the United States? The German secret service recently accused the Russians of being heavily engaged online in the Catalonian referendum and in other elections in the European Union. We have already discussed the United States. Does he realise the urgency of this issue? We should do this now, not in two years’ time.

To sum up, we need to spend more money on hard power, but we also need to get the balance between hard and soft power right. We need to fundamentally re-examine what global Britain means and how we can maximise our influence in the world to defend the existing order and gently but resolutely deter countries that wish to undermine it, such as the Russian Federation under its current leadership and other states. Russian conflict strategies are an example of how political and other forms of war and conflict are changing. I am ready and willing to help and support the Government in that challenge, and I hope that they are willing to listen to me and other hon. Members on both sides of the House who wish to contribute to that debate.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who made an excellent and powerful speech.

I remember my first flight to St Petersburg in May 2005 as clearly as if it were yesterday. I was on my way to take up my post as director of the British Council’s operations there, and I felt a palpable sense of hope combined with a healthy dose of trepidation. I was looking forward to improving my Russian and getting settled into my new life in St Pete before formally starting the job in September, but I was also wondering what the coming years held in store for me, given the parlous state of the bilateral relationship.

Equally memorable, but for very different reasons, was my flight out of Russia in January 2008. The British Council had become a pawn in the stand-off that followed the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko by two state-sponsored hitmen on the streets of London, and we had been forced to close our St Petersburg office. In spite of the aggression and unpleasantness that came to dominate the relationship between the British Council and the Russian authorities, Russia will always hold a special place in my heart. It is a fascinating country of contradictions, extremes, suffering and joy, and I will never forget my time there. A wise person
once said: “You can leave Russia, but it will never leave you,” and I can certainly confirm the truth of that statement.

Being in the eye of that diplomatic storm for a couple of years enabled me to see at first hand the extent to which politics is underpinned by emotion, instinct, psychology and history. Russia is a proud nation, and its people are deeply attached to the concept of uvazhaniye, or respect. The national psyche is rooted in a sense that no Russian should ever be treated as second-rate, and anchored by the suspicion that Mother Russia is constantly being disrespected and destabilised by malevolent external forces.

The identity, instincts and mindset of the Russian people are shaped by geography. Inhabitants of a vast landmass, a country with borders so long that they are impossible to defend, the Russians have always suffered from encirclement anxiety. Their world view is shaped by the conviction that those who seek to exploit and undermine nasha rodina—the motherland—are constantly hovering on her doorstep, and their default position is therefore to strike first, to subjugate their neighbours and from this platform to build a sphere of influence.

From the empire-building of Peter the Great, to the establishment of the Soviet Union and its extension to the eastern bloc countries, the Russians’ constant and furious opposition to the expansion of NATO and Putin’s adventurism in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, the narrative of encirclement provides the backdrop to every chapter of Russia’s turbulent history and actuality. That potent combination of pride and paranoia lies at the heart of every big political decision that has ever been made in Russia. It is the iron thread that connects the Tsars to Stalin and Putin.

Understanding the historical, cultural and geopolitical forces that shape Russian behaviour is by no means the same as excusing it. The Russian Government have literally been allowed to get away with murder for far too long. There are 10,000 dead in Ukraine, and 10 times that number in Syria. Alexander Litvinenko was brutally murdered by the Russian state, and at least a dozen more adversaries of Mr Putin died in suspicious circumstances on the streets of London. Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov were assassinated in Moscow, a stone’s throw from the Kremlin. Now we have Sergei Skripal, his daughter and a British police officer struck down by a nerve agent on the streets of a quiet town in Wiltshire.

The Skripal attacks provoked a great deal of speculation about why the Kremlin would choose to carry out such a high-profile hit just a few short months before the World cup. In my view, the explanation is a simple one, encapsulated in two simple words: greed and self-preservation. The Putin regime has no guiding ideology. It exists to protect and further the financial interests of a narrow elite and to preserve its grip on power. It is a kleptocracy, turbocharged by hydrocarbons.

When oil is selling at more than $100 a barrel, there are rich pickings, and the nexus of government officials and mafia bosses who run modern Russia are able to live and co-exist in relative peace and harmony. A few years ago, the price dropped to near $40 a barrel, and although it has risen recently, it is still struggling to reach $70. The pie has shrunk, which has constrained the Kremlin’s ability to incentivise and buy loyalty. What does a Russian President do if they are no longer able to offer the carrot to their henchmen and cronies? They must deploy the stick. They must send the message, loud and clear, to all those who may know their secrets, and be thinking about betraying them, that retribution will be brutal, cruel and swift.

While assassination on the streets of Britain is Putin’s specific weapon of choice in securing the loyalty of the various clans and cabals that run Russia, he also knows that he must retain the broader support of the Russian people. He has done that through a series of cynical and ruthless foreign policy initiatives and military interventions. He knows that he needs to compensate for the abject failure of his Government to place the Russian economy on a sustainable growth footing, and he does so by seeking to unite his people against a range of common enemies. It is the oldest trick in the book. Thus the Russian threat to our security is not only through the Salisbury attack or the murder of Litvinenko. We see it in the invasion of Ukraine and the indiscriminate bombing of Syria. From 24 to 28 February, Russia conducted 20 bombing missions every day in eastern Ghouta. The month-long assault of eastern Ghouta alone is estimated to have killed more than 1,600 people, most of them thanks to Russian bombs. It has brought the death toll in Syria to more than half a million people. There are also 5 million refugees and more than 6 million displaced people.

As we have seen with the refugee crisis and the threat from Islamic State, the effects of Russian intervention have rippled directly on to our shores. President Putin deploys state-sponsored murder to retain the loyalty and discipline of his immediate entourage, and he uses military aggression to secure the broader support of the Russian people. Those strategies represent a grave threat to our national security and the security of our partners and allies. Both strategies must be tackled and defeated.

Russia’s geopolitical influence and substantial military clout stand in stark contrast to the small size and fragile state of its economy. In 2013, Russia’s economy was roughly the size of Italy’s and considerably smaller than Germany’s. Russia is grossly over-reliant on hydrocarbons, with approximately 70% of its GDP linked to the oil and gas industries. With the price of a barrel of oil plummeting, the value of the rouble tumbling, the demographic time bomb ticking, sanctions biting and poor economic policy decisions compounding those problems, the Russian economy is facing a perfect storm.

Against that backdrop, sanctions as a foreign policy tool are ultimately likely to have real effect. The sectoral sanctions imposed by the EU in the wake of the shooting down of flight MH17 by a Russian-made missile in July 2014 certainly led Russia to tread more carefully in its incursions into eastern Ukraine. There is some evidence to suggest that President Putin is not actively seeking to up the ante there.

The UK Government must now build on the success of those measures by committing to the following things. First, we must ensure that the Magnitsky amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 is implemented effectively. The Magnitsky amendment was a vital change to the legislation because it strikes at the hypocritical heart of the Putin regime, and makes clear to those with hidden assets in the west that Putin cannot protect them. For it to be effective, however, the sanctions list must be as accurate as possible, and the Government must therefore set out how members of
the public. Members of Parliament and peers can suggest additional names to be added to the sanctions list and the visa bans.

Secondly, we must continue to support asset freezes, visa bans and economic sanctions against Russia until such time as the terms of the Minsk ceasefire agreement, under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have been fully implemented. Minsk is far from ideal, but it represents the only hope for stability and peace.

Thirdly, we must continue to support sanctions that are specifically connected to the annexation of Crimea for as long as Crimea is occupied.

Fourthly, we must commit to supporting the training and equipping of Ukrainian forces in the event of any attempt by Russia to ramp up hostilities in Ukraine, for example through a new land grab.

Fifthly, we must press for full implementation of the EU-Ukraine deep and comprehensive free trade agreement. Russian concerns about the DCFTA are simply not credible. Ukraine is a sovereign country and is therefore free to sign international agreements as it sees fit.

Sixthly, we must argue forcefully for the completion of the EU energy union. The EU's fragmented energy market and infrastructure cause several EU member states, including Germany, to be more reliant than is necessary on Russian oil and gas. That in turn gives Russia disproportionate influence in its dealings with the EU. By investing in interconnectors and integrating the energy trading market, the EU would fundamentally rebalance its relationship with Russia.

Seventhly, we must address the elephant in the room: the World cup. FIFA has handed Putin a propaganda coup, and in the wake of the Skripal poisoning, it was right for the Government to confirm that there would be no official UK representation at the World cup. We must hold firm to that.

My abiding memory of my time in Russia was of a burgeoning sense of polarisation between society and state. I saw and heard the values, instincts and hopes of growing numbers of young, well-educated and internationally minded Russians contrasting sharply with an increasingly reactionary and authoritarian governing elite.

Support for Putin was, and still is, relatively strong and widespread, but it is brittle. He derives his legitimacy from the fact that people are prepared to trade the rule of law, pluralism, transparency and freedom of speech for the security, stability and economic growth that he offers. However, when Russian holiday jets are being blown up in response to military adventurism, and when recession and inflation become the dominant features of the Russian economy, many more Russians will start to draw the conclusion that their President is failing to keep his side of the bargain.

Change in Russia, however, will not come any time soon, as evidenced by the recent election. President Putin can still count on the support of the majority of Russian voters, with the only notable exception being the growing middle class in Moscow and St Petersburg. Clearly, the assiduously developed propaganda that is pumped out by the state media machine plays a major role in maintaining Putin's approval ratings, but my time in Russia also taught me that the Russian people are still traumatised by what they perceive to have been the chaos and humiliation of the Yeltsin years. The stability that Putin brought following that turbulent period continues to underpin his popularity today.

It is essential that we respect the will of the Russian people. Vladimir Putin has been their leader of choice for more than 15 years, and he will continue as President until 2022. Let us therefore engage with Russia as it is, not how we would like it to be. Let us demonstrate through our words and deeds that we truly understand the history, culture, interests and foreign policy objectives of this vast nation with huge potential.

Let us also be absolutely clear, strong and resolute in the face of Russian aggression. The clarity, strength and resolution must start right here in this House. The Kremlin will constantly and consistently attempt to divide us, and we must not allow them to do so. That is why it is vital that my party makes it crystal clear that we support both the words and actions of the Government, the EU and our NATO allies in dealings with Russia.

This is not the moment for whataboutery. This is the time for a robust defence of our values, and clear recognition that if a bully is given an inch, he will take a mile. Let us therefore move forward together, across parties and communities, to forge an unbreakable and unanimous position on this issue of profound importance to our national interest. Let us send this message to Mr Putin, loud and clear: "The British people will no longer tolerate the brazen and reckless actions of your regime, and we will no longer tolerate the way in which you and your cronies use London as a laundromat for your ill-gotten gains."

We will act rapidly and robustly to deliver the changes that are long overdue. We have the utmost respect for the history and culture of Russia, and we will never forget the tremendous sacrifices that the Russian people made when they stood shoulder to shoulder with us to defeat the Nazis. We also accept that Russia will possibly—perhaps probably—never be a liberal democracy, and we have absolutely no desire to impose our world view. Nobody in their right mind is talking about regime change, but we need to see radical behaviour change.

At the outset of my speech I mentioned the Russian word uvažhaniye, meaning respect, and underlined the importance that Russia rightly attaches to being respected by others. Respect, however, is a two-way street, and it has to be earned. If the current occupants of the Kremlin wish to earn our respect, they must radically change their mindset and behaviour, and they must do so now.

2.24 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship for the second time, Mr Bone, and to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) on securing today’s important debate, although my speech will be more about not letting our guard down than going through several points; I have no list.

As colleagues may be aware, this is an issue on which I have spoken several times since my election last year. Nevertheless, I continue to be concerned about Russia’s threatening activity. I grew up in the ’50s and ’60s, and
I remember the practice sirens to warn us of impending nuclear attack. That was the most chilling time of anyone’s life, and none of us wants to go back there.

Russia’s activity undoubtedly affects our country, and we continue to see Russian military forces probing our boundaries. That aspect of Russian behaviour poses a real danger to the UK and our overstretched armed forces. Russian submarine activity has increased tenfold in the north Atlantic in recent years, and last year we had to respond to 33 of those incursions. That is a concern, but the threat from Russia goes far beyond that. It is growing and adapting and the threat has now taken on a more malign form. In this country, we know that all too well, given the devastating and seemingly effortless use of the nerve agent Novichok on the streets of Salisbury earlier this year. Although that was indeed a reckless action, we would be naive to think that that is all that Russia has planned, given our level of exposure to a potentially catastrophic cyber-attack, similar to NotPetya in Ukraine. That follows warnings from GCHQ and the FBI that Russia is currently targeting millions of computers in preparation for a major cyber-attack.

Moreover, some of the evidence that we took in the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee shows frightening evidence of bots and misinformation, which to my mind is aimed at driving wedges into the western alliance. We are not just dealing with traditional threats—those that come from land, sea and air. Hostile activity from Russia directed towards this country is becoming more common. It is also adapting and taking more aspersive forms: cyber-attacks. As I have said before, those are not the actions of a rational state with a stable leadership that wants to play by the rules. We should remember that when we consider our next steps.

When dealing with Russia we must try to look at the balance of power in Europe from a Russian point of view. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) recently pointed out, there has been a sort of Russian national paranoia for most of its existence—especially since 1917—and with some reason. The hon. Member for Aberavon touched on that. Consider the losses and upheaval suffered through two world wars, with 20 million dead in war world war two alone.

The Russian people are kept in a state of constant existential threat by their leadership. I do not believe that we in the west deliberately create that threat. We must maintain a strong defence, but that is read in Russia as a threat because that is how the modern Russian leadership clings to power and, incidentally, to unbelievable wealth. By portraying the west as an evil and inhuman enemy, they feel surrounded, and therefore do what history teaches us that states in that condition do: they cling to a perceived powerful leader. It is no accident that Putin is often shown in a heroic light—sometimes bare chested, riding a horse and carrying a gun. I am very glad that our leaders do not do the same, although I am glad that our Government are showing strength and sending the strongest possible message of condemnation to the Russian leadership. Their continued provocations must be met with an appropriate and sustained response.

That response, however, must come from the international community as a whole, as we are seeing similar activity from Russia around the world. To pick just a couple of examples, we have seen the use of hard power in Crimea and Syria recently, as we saw it in Georgia and Chechnya in the past. Although I have no doubt that we will see that again in the future, it is right that, in the face of such hostility and overwhelming historical precedent, we deploy a range of tools from the full breadth of our national security apparatus, to prevent it from happening again. It is appropriate that we continue to push for NATO to strengthen its deterrence and defence capabilities, while ensuring that dialogue with Russia continues, as part of the alliance’s commitment to avoiding misunderstanding and miscalculation.

We must also remember that the big scary bear to the east is not really that powerful at all, as was touched on earlier. Its economy is two thirds of ours; it is smaller than Italy’s. Its economy is also flatlining, showing no signs of growth. It does not stand a chance of competing seriously with us, Europe or America. So what does it do? It seeks to stabilise those around it, while concentrating the minds of its population on an existential threat. In the past, that meant massively investing in tanks, guns and aeroplanes, which they and we did, but they have discovered a new and much cheaper weapon of destabilisation, which could be equally devastating: the aforementioned cyber-attack. We have had several cyber-incursions of late. So far, we have dealt with them, but they are constant.

I have described Russia as not being so scary, but because it spends a significant amount of its GDP on defence, it has a very competent military—nothing close to the combined might of the west, but potentially destabilising—and now the bear is wounded and cornered and therefore weak. Like any wild animal in such circumstances, it becomes incredibly dangerous. That is why we must maintain our alliances. We must maintain and enhance our defence spending. We need to secure our tier 1 military status as a matter of priority and maintain our position in NATO by increasing our own budget to 3% of GDP. We must also push for more NATO members to meet and exceed the target of investing 2% of their GDP on defence.

Overall, we must speak beyond the Russian leadership, who have a vested interest in maintaining the dangerous instability. We must speak directly to the Russian people, reassure them that we mean no harm and bring them into the fold of harmonious human co-existence. They might then rid themselves of their dangerous leadership and thus, as a peaceful neighbour, become a prosperous part of the European family.

We have no disagreement with the people of Russia, who have been responsible, as the Prime Minister said, for so many great achievements throughout their history—including the ongoing World Cup, which England will surely win. We must celebrate that which unites us, such as football, while being wary of that which divides us.

2.31 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) for securing time for this wide-ranging and topical debate. He also reminded us that the debate is not anti-Russian, and identified the need for a permanent structure against subversive measures. I agree with that and will return to it later.

I was pleased to listen to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) with his direct knowledge of and insight into the Russian psyche and economy,
and to the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), who raised cyber-attacks and incursions into the North sea, which are both issues that I will return to. I look forward to hearing the Front-Bench spokespeople in due course.

There can be almost nobody who disputes that the democratically elected Russian Government have some very draconian anti-gay and lesbian laws, have been implicated in the murders of a number of journalists and dissenters, and have form in ignoring international law and undermining state sovereignty; or that there are serious questions about Russian money laundering and dodgy cyber-activities promoting fake news and possibly influencing various electoral contests around the globe. The list seems almost endless, and I could go on, but I think everybody gets the idea.

Where should I begin? It is worth putting on the record my belief that the UK needs to maintain its co-operation with our allies in combating the various threats. That is best practice, irrespective of whether we believe the threats to be real or imagined. I have very real concerns that the UK is isolating itself through Brexit and that working with our European friends is more important than ever before. My colleagues and I in the Scottish National party believe the UK should pledge to remain a member of the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council post-Brexit. It is important that the UK maintains relations on the UN Security Council and keeps a united position with international allies on the matter of Russia. The SNP has been at the front of cross-party calls for the Government to adopt a Bill similar to the Magnitsky Act in the US, which would allow the party to call for the Government to adopt a Bill similar to the Magnitsky Act in the US, which would allow the UK to impose secondary sanctions on those found guilty of human rights abuses in Russia. The list seems almost endless, and I could go on, but I think we are all on the same page.

We have heard much about the physical threats from Russia, including the Salisbury attack, Syria, the annexation of Crimea, and activity in the Georgian territories and Ukraine. I will not delve into those issues more deeply; I think we are all on the same page.

We know Russian bombers regularly probe NATO airspace with incursions as far south as Spain and as far north as Scotland. Russian jets press on the Scottish coast at a time when working with our European friends is more important than ever before. My colleagues and I in the Scottish National party believe the UK should pledge to remain a member of the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council post-Brexit. It is important that the UK maintains relations on the UN Security Council and keeps a united position with international allies on the matter of Russia. The SNP has been at the front of cross-party calls for the Government to adopt a Bill similar to the Magnitsky Act in the US, which would allow the foreign sanctions that the hon. Member for Aberavon spoke about earlier. I thoroughly agree with that.

The Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport inquiry into fake news has raised key concerns about Russia’s interference in UK politics and society, including evidence highlighting that between 6% and 7% of URL-sharing activity in the US election came from Russian sources. University of Edinburgh research has revealed that more than 400 Russian-run Twitter accounts that were active during the 2016 US presidential election were also actively posting about Brexit during the EU referendum. In March, the Sunday Herald reported that Scotland’s First Minister is facing online cyber-attacks from Kremlin trolls. She has been aggressively targeted on social media. The SNP has recommended that the Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission, local government, GCHQ and the new National Cyber Security Centre establish permanent machinery for monitoring cyber-activity in respect to public figures, elections and referendums.

Accusations abound regarding potential Russian interference with the Brexit vote. I do not know how that stacks up. We will all have seen the press reports that appeared first in The Observer about Arron Banks, the millionaire businessman who bankrolled the Brexit leave campaign, having had multiple meetings with Russian embassy officials in the run-up to the referendum. The SNP wants to ensure that this specific case of interference in the Brexit referendum is investigated fully and impartially, and that the implications of Russian political interference, if proven, are treated with extreme severity, given that the outcome goes against the wishes of the Scottish electorate. I look forward to learning the results of the Electoral Commission’s investigation into the source of Mr Banks’s £8.4 million referendum donations and loans. We call on the Vote Leave campaign to engage with the authorities transparently and fully in the investigations.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that Putin and his regime have been portrayed as villains of the piece, not without some justification. He is not an imaginary bogeyman; he is very real. He is also serving what is likely to be his last term as President of the Russian Federation, barring similar shenanigans to what has previously happened. We must therefore begin preparations for the post-Putin era, but who are his potential successors? I do not know, but that may present a potential opening, with the possibility of not repeating past mistakes that have led us to the current situation of seriously strained relations. As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight has suggested, an easier visa regime may help assist that position. However, I fear that a diplomatic service consumed by Brexit will not be able to find the resources to do that. Nevertheless, we have to be able to defend ourselves against fake news and bot armies, as well as conventional attacks and terror-related incidents, irrespective of whether they be of Russian or any other origin.

2.38 pm

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight, the SNP has been at the front of cross-party calls for the Government to adopt a Bill similar to the Magnitsky Act in the US, which would allow the party to call for the Government to adopt a Bill similar to the Magnitsky Act in the US, which would allow the UK to impose secondary sanctions on those found guilty of human rights abuses in Russia. The list seems almost endless, and I could go on, but I think we are all on the same page.

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(Mr Seely) for his detailed introduction; he is clearly very close to the issue, particularly so in his previous life, before he came to this place. He shows a huge and continuing interest in security matters. I take issue, however, with his mention of a member of the Labour leader’s staff, who is not able to respond. That did not need to be aired here. It is possible to do that in other places, but it is not for this place.

Russian foreign policy making has become increasingly the preserve of Putin. Russian foreign policy is based on realist assumptions—a vision of zero-sum competition between nations, using largely hard power to establish spheres of interest based on geography. Policies are aimed at restoring national pride and Russia’s place at the top table in world affairs. Defence spending has gone up, and Putin’s popularity is reported to be a near-record high.

That reflects the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who spoke of understanding the culture of the Russian people, how nationalistic they are and how deeply entrenched their national heritage is. That is one reason why Putin has been able to get away with his actions following the sanctions placed on Russia.

My hon. Friend spent time in Russia with the British Council, which does a huge amount of great work, not only in Russia but across the whole world, as I have said before. Its presence in other countries is one of the United Kingdom’s best forms of access to them, which further increases our sphere of influence. We should always look, at the first opportunity, to get the British Council into those areas.

Most of our senior policy makers were not quite awake to Mr Putin’s returning to the presidency in 2014, since when there has been a stand-off with the west over the Russian intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and a dramatic fall in oil prices. Since then, hard-line nationalist assumptions have increasingly entered official Russian foreign policy, although they have no means of taking it over completely. Economic difficulties have increased, and Russian nationalism and assertive foreign policies have been increasingly used to bolster the legitimacy of the Government at home, who continue to use external threats for that purpose.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) raised the World cup. I certainly hope that we win it—we are having such a good run. He also raised cyber issues and the weakness of the Russian economy. A significant amount of work has been done on the cyber issue, including reports produced by the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee and several others. We should look at those and consider how to follow up on them.

Hon. Members also mentioned alleged war crimes in Syria—particularly the chemical weapons attacks in Douma and in the north-west of Damascus in Ghouta. The OPCW fact-finding mission arrived in Syria on 14 April 2018 to establish whether chemical weapons, and what type, were used in Douma, although it has not attempted to ascribe responsibility for their use. We need to seriously look at such issues and find out those facts. There have been a huge amount of human rights abuses by the Syrians and by ISIL terrorists, and we need to seriously consider how to deal with and resolve such horrendousness in the future.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made several points on cyber-attacks. More importantly, he raised the protecting of the rights of the LGBTQ community. Although the Russians are making a show of doing so during the World cup, which in itself is a step forward, it needs to be embedded in Russia so that the right sort of support is provided.
The hon. Member for Isle of Wight raised a couple of issues that the Minister should address, particularly regarding a cross-agency approach. Perhaps we could use the “Five Eyes” network. Such systems are crucial. Rather than looking only at networks internal to the UK, it is far more important to co-ordinate our networks across the globe. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the sorts of sectors we should cover, including the key sector of investment banking. Not all the money brought in is through money laundering—a lot is done through the financial sector. We must address that and look at what sort of people are involved. Allegations have been made regarding raffle tixkles being bought for tennis matches, and the Minister should also address the serious issue of party donations.

I wholly agree with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight that, along with the British Council, the BBC World Service plays an integral role in the work that needs to be done. It puts across the British heritage angle. That is a huge tool in developing relationships. Many people rely on the BBC World Service to listen to what they believe to be factual information. We need to invest money in that. I am not sure I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Department for International Development should do that, but I am sure that the Minister can find money elsewhere for that investment.

I support the hon. Gentleman’s comments on the visa regime, but although we are talking about Russia, there are other countries we should support in that respect. On the policy of cutting professionals who come to the United Kingdom, I am glad that the Home Secretary has managed to reverse the position for doctors who come here. I hope that will also be the case for other professionals, such as the nurses and medical staff from eastern Europe and elsewhere across the globe.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Prime Minister is considering downgrading our status as a tier 1 defence nation? That serious issue has been developing in the newspapers, but I do not believe anyone in Parliament has asked or answered that question. If I may, I want to use the Minister as a conduit and get information from the Government about whether the Prime Minister is considering downgrading us to a second-tier defence nation. I do not believe that would be in the interest of the nation. There have been significant cuts, but in order to fund the national health service we should not cut our defence. Defence has been hugely strategic for the United Kingdom for a very long time and I hope it stays that way. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

2.52 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) for securing this debate and for his comprehensive and thought-provoking paper on contemporary Russian conflict, which the Foreign Office is digesting. I was particularly struck by his assessment in the report and his speech that Russia uses at least 50 tools of state power, grouped into seven elements with “command and control” at its heart.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I particularly appreciated the thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for Aberavvon (Stephen Kinnock), who has direct personal experience of working in Russia. His speech deserves to be widely read. Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) gave us all a very cogent and comprehensive overview of the threats that we face from Russia.

It should be clear to us all that Russia has become more authoritarian, more nationalist and more aggressive in recent years. It increasingly defines itself in opposition to the west and as a victim of western aggression. It attempts to portray itself as a responsible global power, but its actions tell a different story. In reality, for some time it has been using a range of methods to undermine the international norms and laws on which our security and prosperity depend, and to destabilise our advanced democracies, open societies and free economies. Those methods range from conventional military intervention—as we have seen in Syria and its illegal actions in Georgia and Ukraine—to acts of non-military aggression in the form of disinformation and cyber-attacks, as we saw in Estonia in 2007. They range from stirring up trouble—as we saw in the attempted coup in Montenegro—to clamping down on dissent by locking up people such as Oleg Sentsov. All those methods are designed to destabilise by sowing chaos, fear, uncertainty, mistrust, and division.

Russia is expanding the range of its malign activities, as we found to our cost in Salisbury—I will say more about that in a moment—and it continues to strengthen its military capabilities. It engages in provocative military activity near NATO borders, for example by stepping up submarine traffic in the north Atlantic, which we heard about earlier. Russia is also undermining the treaties and norms of global arms control. Just this week we have observed the shameful spectacle of Russia trying to block the efforts of the Conference of States Parties to protect the chemical weapons convention. However, yesterday 82 countries voted in support of the proposal tabled by the UK, and the Conference of States Parties agreed that the OPCW would immediately start work to help to identify those responsible for chemical attacks in Syria. It will be able to attribute the use of chemical weapons to someone.

The attack in Salisbury was an especially egregious example within the pattern of increasing Russian aggression. It clearly showed the risks that Russia is prepared to take in its provocation of the west. We are quite clear that Russia was responsible for this outrageous act. It is also pretty clear that the Kremlin wholly underestimated the strength of global feeling. Following the expulsion of 153 diplomats from 28 countries and NATO, it can be under no illusion now about our collective resolve. In addition to the reckless use of chemical weapons in Salisbury, the Kremlin also seeks to sow discord here in the UK; it wants to disrupt our systems and undermine our institutions. We know that there have been attacks on the UK media, telecommunication companies and energy providers, along with attempts to interfere in our democratic processes. We have seen no evidence of successful interference, but we can see the threat and we must remain vigilant.

I assure the House that the Government are responding to those threats with strength and determination. I assure the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and everyone that we are working across Government to protect our democracy. We have invested nearly £2 billion in the UK’s national cyber security strategy and in the establishment of the National Cyber
Security Centre, which will fight cyber-attacks by states and criminal organisations. We are collaborating with international partners, industry and civil society to tackle the threat of disinformation and propaganda.

Independent regulators such as the Electoral Commission and Ofcom are also playing their part. The commission is investigating irregularities reported during the EU referendum campaign and Ofcom is conducting 11 investigations into breaches of the broadcasting code. Disinformation is not new, but it has been turbocharged by the power of social media. In whatever form it takes—old-fashioned propaganda, fake news, or downright lies—it is designed to manipulate, confuse and divide. It is also designed to undermine trust in our institutions and our way of life.

Freedom of speech and a free, open and accessible media are hugely important components of that way of life. I understand why my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight requested a counter-propaganda Bill, but will he consider the possible unforeseen consequences that might ensue? I am sure he would agree that we would not wish to impose a legal strait jacket on the personal freedoms that we hold so dear. Nor should we assume that problems will be solved simply by passing legislation. We will continue to use all the tools at our disposal to bear down on disinformation, while at the same time continuing to champion freedom of speech. We will also look to enhance online safety. The Government will publish a White Paper on that in the coming months. Potential areas for legislation include a code of practice, transparency reporting and online advertising.

We are committed to tackling illicit finances in the UK, whatever their origin. I welcome the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report on the subject, to which the Government will respond in due course. We are determined that this country should not be a safe haven for dirty money and money launderers and we will ensure that the full weight of law enforcement is brought to bear on corrupt elites who look to use, move or hide the proceeds of crime.

Since the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 was introduced, more than £2.2 billion has been seized. The first unexplained wealth order has already been issued—there was a question about that—and we are cracking down on the use of shell companies to launder money through UK real estate transactions. Through the national economic crime centre, embedded within the National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office will work with law enforcement partners to ensure that big business and wealthy foreign elites cannot use their wealth to obstruct justice.

Parliament recently passed the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018—indeed, I was in charge of the Bill’s passage—which gives us the powers to sanction individuals and entities for a wide range of purposes including money laundering, as the name suggests, and take action against those suspected of gross human rights abuses such as those committed against Sergei Magnitsky. Indeed, the whole House joined as one in welcoming the embodiment of the Magnitsky clause in that Act. While not directly related to the fight against illicit finance, the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill will also strengthen our ability to counter hostile state activity by bringing in new powers to stop, question, search and detain individuals at the UK border.

In addition to domestic action, the UK continues to work closely with our international partners and allies to tackle Russian aggression across the globe. We have been at the forefront of the strong and determined international response to the Salisbury attack mentioned earlier. Sanctions remain a key part of the ongoing response, and we will continue to work proactively on that with our US, EU and G7 partners. Indeed, we are working with those partners to fight back against state-sponsored aggression in cyber-space. Together, for the first time on such a scale, we attributed the NotPetya cyber-attack to the Russian military. In April, in another first, we issued a joint statement with the US Government publicly exposing an extensive and sustained campaign of Russian intrusion into the internet infrastructure of both our countries.

At the G7 summit earlier this month, leaders agreed on a rapid response mechanism to share intelligence, co-ordinate action and develop new strategies to tackle malign state activity, and at today’s European Council the Prime Minister will be discussing how EU countries can work together to meet the range of threats we face. We hope that leaders will agree to work alongside NATO to build stronger defences against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats, take collective action to tackle Russian cyber-threats and extend EU efforts to counter Russian disinformation and interference in Europe.

At next month’s NATO summit in Brussels, we will seek unity and consensus on Russia and emphasise the need to work towards a strong defence and deterrence policy. At the western Balkans summit in London next month, the Government will stand firm in our resolve, alongside partners, to help the region counter Russian disinformation and cyber-threats. Indeed, the UK is investing more than £100 million over five years in countering disinformation that targets our national interests at home and overseas.

Countering disinformation also underpins our efforts in tackling the challenges faced by Russia’s neighbours—Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary attended the Ukraine reform conference yesterday, and our £30 million in support of Ukraine’s reform agenda includes strategic communications support and building the Ukrainian armed forces’ resilience.

We feel obliged to take our current approach because Russia appears increasingly prepared to test our collective response. However, as has been said on both sides of the House, I stress that we are not looking for confrontation. We have no quarrel with the Russian people. We are encouraged that they have warmly welcomed World cup fans from around the world, and we want to work with Russia on issues that matter to all of us, as we did on World cup preparations.

However, we will not compromise with states who seek to degrade the structures and treaties that keep us all safe. Russia needs to choose a different path. It must act as the responsible international partner it claims to be, and indeed, the partner it should be, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Until that happens—I hope that it will—we will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our many partners and allies, resolute, determined and united against those who seek to divide us.
Mr Seely: Thank you, Ms Buck, as well as Mr Bone, for your chairmanship of the debate. I thank the Front-Bench Members as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) and the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for taking part.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point, it is incredibly important to understand Russia’s complex, somewhat love-hate relationship with the west and, in debates such as this, to seek more to understand than to condemn. That is why I wrote the definition and have suggested measures that the Government can take. It is important to do that rather than simply see the world in binary terms.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Russian Federation activity in the UK and globally.
The defence fire and rescue project contract will provide significantly improved safety for the MOD and its firefighters through investment in modern firefighting vehicles and improved fire risk management systems. It will also deliver significant financial savings which can be reinvested in defence. The selected bidder for this contract is Capita Business Services.

The contract duration is 12 years. The contingent liability will commence on contract award and reach a maximum value of £37 million in financial year 2020-21 and will reduce thereafter as the contract progresses until it ceases in financial year 2025-26. It reflects a commercial arrangement that represents optimum value for money to the Department.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections.

[HCWS770]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) will take place on 21 June 2018 in Luxembourg.

The Council will first be invited to agree a general approach on directives on work-life balance for parents and carers, and transparent and predictable working conditions. The presidency will also pursue a general approach on the revision of regulations governing the co-ordination of EU social security systems.

The Council will then receive progress reports on a proposal to create a European labour authority, and a directive related to equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

Under non-legislative items, there will first be a policy debate on the European semester. As part of this agenda item, the Council will be asked to approve draft Council recommendations on the national reform programmes 2018 of each member state; endorse the opinions of the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) on the 2018 country-specific recommendations (CSRs) and the implementation of the 2017 CSRs; and adopt a proposal on guidelines for the employment policies of the member states.

Following this, the Council will be asked to adopt a number of draft Council conclusions on the future of work, early childhood development and free frameworks.

Under any other business, the Commission will provide information on plans for a new European social fund plus (ESF+) programme and an update on recent international developments in the field of social policy.

To close the meeting the Austrian delegation will outline the work programme of the incoming presidency.

[HCWS771]
Written Statements

Tuesday 19 June 2018

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): On 5 June I made a statement to the House in which I set out my decision in relation to the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky.

I announced that having considered the CMA’s report, I agreed with its findings on the public interest grounds and its finding that undertakings to divest Sky News to Disney or to an alternative suitable buyer could potentially remedy the adverse plurality public interest concerns identified.

I also noted that there remained a number of issues with the undertakings that had been offered and that these would require discussions between my officials and the parties in order to reach agreement on an acceptable form of the remedy.

Following the successful conclusion of these discussions and the resolution of these issues, I am today publishing updated undertakings offered by 21st Century Fox along with new undertakings offered by Disney for the divestment of Sky News to Disney.

These undertakings are offered on improved terms and will include:

- a commitment from Disney to operate and maintain a Sky News branded news service for 15 years rather than 10 years
- a restriction on Disney from selling Sky News for 15 years without the consent of the Secretary of State
- an extension of the funding commitment from 21st Century Fox from 10 years to 15 years
- an increase in the total funds available to Sky News, to at least £100 million per year, with operating costs protected in real terms; and
- a formal commitment from Disney to preserve the editorial independence of Sky News

In my view, these revised undertakings meet the criteria that I set out to the House on 5 June and will help to ensure that Sky News remains financially viable over the long term; is able to operate as a major UK-based news provider; and is able to take its editorial decisions independently, free from any potential outside influence.

Under the legislation, I am required to consult formally for 15 days on the undertakings, which I propose to accept. Views as to whether these proposals are sufficient to remedy the adverse plurality public interest concerns raised by this merger are sought by 5pm on Wednesday 4 July 2018. The consultation can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sky-fox-merger-proposed-undertakings-by-21st-century-fox-inc-and-the-walt-disney-company.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

FCO Services

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): FCO Services operates as a trading fund of the FCO. I have set it the following performance targets for 2018-2019:

- A return on capital employed of at least 3.5% (statutory commitment).
- An in-year surplus before financing and dividend costs.
- A productivity ratio of at least 80%, measuring actual billable hours vs. available billable hours.
- A customer satisfaction result of at least 80%.
- A Your Say score for “Employee Engagement” measuring above 58%.
- A Your Say score for “My Manager”, measuring above 62%.

FCO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2018-2019.

FCO Services is a trading fund of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCO and other UK Government Departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of global maintenance work. FCO services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping (UK NACE), helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My noble Friend, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon), has made the following written ministerial statement:

On the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict and as the Prime Minister’s special representative on this issue, I wish to inform the House of the next steps for the UK’s preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative (PSVI) ahead of a UK-hosted international meeting in November 2019.

Four years on from the UK hosted global summit to end sexual violence in conflict in June 2014, the scale of these crimes remains truly appalling. UK leadership since then has secured the international political attention that preventing sexual violence in conflict rightly deserves. Our collaboration with partners is essential to ensure this remains the case.

Recent examples include a joint visit I made with UN special representative of the Secretary-General Pramila Patten to Iraq in February to shine a spotlight on the need for accountability for survivors of sexual violence and an end to the stigma they face. During a visit to Mosul, I saw for myself the awful devastation Daesh has had on people’s lives and livelihoods, especially for women and girls, including through sexual slavery and forced marriage.

Our political drive has also been backed up by wide-ranging practical support, through ground-breaking work such as the development of the international protocol on the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict. Its second iteration, launched last year, is now being used by the International Criminal Court, the UN and in countries as diverse as Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Burma, DRC, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Uganda. Since 2012, £44 million of UK funding has been allocated to support over 70 projects in 26 countries to provide capacity building on advocacy, protection, survivor support, evidence gathering, judicial reform, prosecution and reparations work. We have also seen our team of PSVI experts deployed more than 90 times to provide support and training on a range of issues from documenting crimes to rehabilitating survivors. We know this support and assistance has had real impact and is delivering real change on the ground.
Implementing and galvanising effective action to bring perpetrators to account, to tackle stigma and to prevent sexual violence in conflict remains a high priority for the UK. We will continue to use our influence to rally sustained international action and push this issue up the global agenda.

Therefore, the UK will host an international meeting on PSVI in 2019, marking five years since the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict. This meeting will seek to achieve a number of outcomes. These include progress on accountability and tackling the culture of impunity; addressing sensitive issues such as support for children born of rape and male, LGBT and disabled survivors; the role of media organisations and faith leaders in tackling survivor stigma; and, working with armed forces to prevent conflict-related sexual violence.

To deliver on this ambition, the UK will work to strengthen both our bilateral and multilateral levels with international partners to secure commitments and make progress on this agenda between now and November 2019. This will include an event at the UN General Assembly in September and a PSVI film festival this November. We have already engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including PSVI champion and focus countries and fellow Commonwealth member states. International organisations remain key partners, such as the office of the UN special representative of the Secretary-General, Pramila Patten; UNFPA; OHCHR and the ICRC. We will uphold the spirit of PSVI and reach out to British and global civil society, parliamentarians and the public.

Staying true to the principles for global action on tackling stigma, we will place survivors at the heart of our collective work.

In 2014, we told the world that it was time to act, now is the time to deliver upon that pledge.

I will keep the House informed of progress on this work.

[HCWS772]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne).

[HCWS774]
Written Statements

Wednesday 20 June 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Impact Target

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): This statement sets the Government’s business impact target in respect of the economic impact on business of regulation which comes into or ceases to be in force for this Parliament, along with related matters as required under section 21 of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 (“the Act”).

It is important to recognise that the Government are setting an ambitious target. The Government are committed to providing legal certainty and a stable environment for business by incorporating all EU law into UK law, as well as taking necessary action in areas such as product safety, plastics and corporate governance. Consequently, the Government will continue to monitor regulatory impacts rigorously, while placing the importance of regulating to tackle these nationally important issues above a strict adherence to the target.

Business impact target

The Government’s target is for a saving of £9 billion to business and voluntary or community bodies from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force during this Parliament.

Interim target

The interim target covers the savings to be achieved from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force in the first three years of this Parliament. The Government’s interim target is a saving of £4.5 billion.

Measurement of the business impact target

The impact of each qualifying measure will be assessed on the basis of its equivalent annual net direct cost to business (EANDCB) measured in 2016 prices and with a 2017 present value base year. As in the previous Parliament, the contribution to the business impact target will be the sum of the EANDCB over the first five years for which the measure will be in force, or the sum of the EANDCB over the full lifetime of the measure for measures that are, or will be, in force for less than five years.

Qualifying regulatory provisions

Under the Act, the measures that are in scope for the business impact target are described as “regulatory provisions”. That includes both legislation and the activities of Ministers and listed regulators. The Government must designate the categories of regulatory provisions that are to be scored against the target (“qualifying regulatory provisions”). Qualifying regulatory provisions are regulatory provisions that do not fall within any of the exclusions set out below:

a) Regulatory provisions that have been certified by Departments or regulators as falling under the de minimis rule, namely those that have an EANDCB of less than ±£5 million;

b) Regulatory provisions that implement new or changed obligations from European Union regulations, decisions and directives, and other international commitments and obligations, except in cases of gold-plating. This includes measures incorporating EU law into domestic law under the EU Withdrawal Bill and legislation made for the purpose of implementing the EU withdrawal agreement, including implementation of new EU law during the implementation period.

c) Regulatory provisions that have been certified by Departments or regulators as dealing with deficiencies in retained EU law (under the EU Withdrawal Bill and other legislation);

d) Regulatory provisions that are intended to deliver—or to replicate—better competition-based outcomes in markets characterised by market power;

e) Regulatory provisions relating to systemic financial risk;

f) Regulatory provisions relating to civil emergencies;

g) Regulatory provisions concerning fines and penalties, and redress and restitution;

h) Regulatory provisions that implement changes to the classification and scheduling of drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 where these follow the recommendations of the relevant independent advisory body;

i) Regulatory provisions that have been certified by Departments or regulators as relating to the safety of tenants, residents and occupants in buildings that stem from, or relate to, Government’s response to the Grenfell tragedy, reviews, inquiries or working groups;

j) Regulator casework including specific investigation and enforcement activity, individual licence decisions, and individual advice;

k) Education, communications activities, and promotional campaigns by regulators, including media campaigns, posters, factsheets, bulletins, letters, websites, and information/advice helplines;

l) Policy development by regulators, including formal and informal consultations, policy reviews, and ad hoc information requests;

m) Changes to the organisation and management of regulators, except for those resulting from legislative changes or another policy change that is a qualifying regulatory provision;

As required under section 21(1)(a) of the Act.

As required under section 21 (2) of the Act.

As required under section 21 (3)(b) of the Act.

As required under section 21 (3)(a) of the Act.

[HCWS776]
I accept the CMA’s findings that while it is, or may be, the case that a relevant merger situation has been created, the merger does not give rise to a realistic prospect of a substantial lessening of competition in any market.

I have also accepted Ofcom’s conclusions that the merger does not raise concerns in relation to plurality of views, nor does it raise concerns in relation to free expression of opinion in newspapers.

In the light of this, and having considered representations submitted by interested parties in response to the PIIN, I have written to the parties today confirming my decision not to refer the merger for a phase 2 investigation.

I have also notified the CMA, in accordance with section 56(1) of the Enterprise Act 2002, to now deal with the matter from a competition perspective.

The role of the Secretary of State in this process is quasi-judicial and procedures are in place to ensure that I act independently and have followed a process which is fair and impartial.

[HCWS779]

Post-Council for Transport, Telecoms and Energy

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Transport, Telecoms and Energy Council (TTE) took place in Luxembourg. Lord Ashton of Hyde represented the UK at the telecoms session of the Council, on 8 June.

Member states (MS) were asked to vote on a general approach (GA) on the Cybersecurity Act regulation. The UK voted in favour of this GA, after having received waivers from the European Scrutiny Committee (ESC) and European Union Committee (EUC).

This Council went on to hold a progress report/policy debate on the proposed regulation concerning e-privacy, in which the presidency urged MS to help drive progress on the e-privacy regulation.

The Austrian delegation then set out its work programme as the incoming presidency for the second half of 2018. As part of its commitment to completing various digital single market (DSM) initiatives, the Austrian delegation highlighted the importance of continued work on the e-privacy regulation and made clear its ambition to achieve a GA on a .eu top level domain name during the course of its presidency. The Austrian delegation also noted that the next TTE telecoms Council would be held on 4 December 2018.

This session of the Council went on to engage in a policy debate on the directive on the re-use of public sector information (PSI).

The presidency then provided information on the directive on the European electronic communications code (EECC); the regulation on the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC); and the regulation on a framework for the free flow of non-personal data in the EU.

To conclude this session of the Council, the Commission provided information on the state of play of the DSM.

[HCWS778]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Offensive and Dangerous Weapons: Consultation Responses

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 14 October 2017 the Government published a public consultation paper on proposals for new legislative measures on offensive and dangerous weapons.

The proposals included making it a criminal offence for knives purchased online to be delivered to a residential address, making it a criminal offence to possess certain offensive weapons in private and extending the offence of possessing a knife or offensive weapon on school premises to a wider range of educational institutions. Other legislative proposals included amending the offences of threatening with an article with a blade or point or an offensive weapon and updating the definition of a flick knife. The consultation also sought views on making it a criminal offence to sell products containing certain corrosive substances to those under the age of 18 and to possess corrosive substances in a public place, and prohibiting certain large calibre rifles and rapid firing rifles under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968.

The consultation closed on 9 December and I am today publishing a summary of the responses that the consultation received. A copy of the summary will be placed in the House Library and will be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS780]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Gosport Investigation Report

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Today the report of the Gosport independent panel on events at Gosport War Memorial Hospital from the late 1980s to 2001 has been published.

This report follows four years of work by Bishop James Jones and his panel. The Bishop has adopted a strong commitment to a “families first” approach to public disclosure, which means that the process of public disclosure began earlier today with the families themselves.

The report provides a comprehensive account of events at Gosport War Memorial Hospital from the late 1980s to 2001. It has drawn on previous reviews but also on important new material unearthed by the panel.

Given the gravity of issues and the content and scale of the report, we will need to consider its findings with great care and thoroughness across Government in the coming weeks.

All relevant agencies and Departments both nationally and locally, including the Home Office and Ministry of Justice are also giving the report urgent and thorough attention. Once that work is done, the relevant agencies will decide what steps to take next.

Copies of the report have been laid before the House and are available from the Vote Office and at: https://gosportpanel.independent.gov.uk/panel-report/

An oral statement will be delivered to both Houses later today.

[HCWS577]
**Written Statements**

*Thursday 21 June 2018*

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN: 22 June 2018**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 22 June 2018.

ECOFIN will be preceded by a morning meeting of the EIB board of governors:

*Annual EIB governors meeting*

The EIB board of governors meeting will include a speech by the EIB President Werner Hoyer, a governors discussion, reappointment of the board of directors, and approval of the audit report.

Following this, EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following at ECOFIN:

*Early morning session*

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 21 June meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

*VAT “Quick-Fixes”*

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the presidency compromise text in regards to the directive on harmonising and simplifying certain rules in the VAT system and introducing the definitive system for the taxation of trade between member states; the regulation regarding certain exemptions for intra-community transactions and the regulation regarding certified taxable persons.

*European deposit insurance scheme*

The Council will be invited to take note of the presidency progress report on the European deposit insurance scheme.

*Current financial services legislative proposals*

The presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

*Insolvency directive*

The presidency will provide an update on the solvency, restructuring and second-chance directive.

*National reform programmes 2018*

The Council will be invited to approve 2018 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

*Implementation of the stability and growth pact*

The Council will be invited to adopt Council decisions and recommendations in the context of both the excessive deficit procedure and the significant deviation procedure, also part of the European semester.

*Convergence reports*

Also as part of the European semester, the Commission and the European Central Bank will present the convergence reports, which will then be followed by an exchange of views by the Council.

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**Notification of Contingent Liability**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I have today laid before the House of Commons a departmental minute describing the contingent liability associated with the new financial framework between HM Treasury and the Bank of England (the “Bank”). On this occasion it has not been possible to notify Parliament in advance of the contingent liability coming into effect, which is due to the market sensitive nature of the measure.

The contingent liability arises from the new capital framework under which the Treasury commits to provide a capital injection to the Bank in the event that its level of loss-absorbing capital drops below a floor level. At present that floor is set at £500 million. The Bank’s level of loss-absorbing capital will be raised to £3.5 billion during 2018-19. This is part of wider reforms to the financial arrangements between the Bank and Treasury, including clearer principles regarding risk-sharing in future Bank operations.

It is not possible to quantify the size of the contingent liability given the unprecedented nature of economic conditions required for the liability to crystallise. A full departmental minute is laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

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**DEFENCE**

**Reserve Forces and Cadets Association External Scrutiny Team Report**

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson) sent to Lieutenant General (Retired) Brims, the chair of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association’s External Scrutiny Team, to update him on the Future Reserves programme, and particularly on the recommendations that his team’s report made. I am grateful to the team for their work.

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**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Environment Council: June 2018**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The next EU Environment Council will take place on 25 June in Luxembourg. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity (Lord Gardiner of Kimble) intends to represent the UK. Welsh Environment Minister Hannah Blythyn AM will also attend.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for environment will be a policy debate on the recast of the drinking water directive.

Council will adopt the conclusions for delivering on the EU action plan for the circular economy. There will also be a lunchtime discussion concerning climate adaptation in the EU to 2020 and beyond.
On climate, there will be a policy debate on the regulation of CO₂ standards for cars and vans.

Any other business will include information from the Commission on the following legislative proposals:
- Regulation on CO₂ standards for heavy duty vehicles
- Regulation on LIFE Regulation on water reuse
- Regulation on single use plastics
- Regulation on the alignment of environmental reporting obligations

The Commission will then report on the following international meetings:
- EU for Talanoa (Brussels, 13 June 2018)
- Ninth Petersberg climate dialogue (Berlin 17 to 19 June 2018)
- Ministerial on climate action (MoCA) (Brussels 20 and 21 June 2018)

There are currently three member state-led AOBs:
- Beyond 2020—a new global deal on chemicals and waste (tabled by Sweden)
- Paris agreement compliance as an essential element of EU agreements, and enforceability of sustainable development provisions of trade agreements through the dispute settlement resolution (tabled by France)
- Obtaining ambitious results at convention on biological diversity (CBD) COP 15 in 2020 (tabled by France).

[HCWS782]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Today we are publishing a document produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU: “Technical note—Coordination on External Security”.

This will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS788]

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Government put forward three amendments to amendment 19P carried in the House of Lords on 18 June.

In these amendments, reference is made to a motion “in neutral terms”. The purpose of this written ministerial statement is to set out the Government’s understanding of the way in which this reference to “in neutral terms” will operate in practice.

Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion when it is introduced by the Government under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or is not in fact cast in neutral terms and hence whether the motion is or is not amendable.

The Government recognise that it is open for Ministers and Members of the House of Commons to table motions on and debate matters of concern and that, as is the convention, parliamentary time will be provided for this.

[HCWS781]

General Affairs Council: June 2018

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 will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 26 June 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:
- Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process
- Ministers will exchange views and agree conclusions on enlargement, covering the western Balkans and Turkey.
- Preparation of the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018

The Council will discuss the draft conclusions for the June European Council. The conclusions are expected to cover migration; security and defence; jobs, growth and competitiveness; innovation and digital; the multiannual financial framework (MFF); and external relations.

The Bulgarian presidency will update ministers on progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions. These covered jobs, growth and competitiveness, and other items, including the Salisbury attack.

European Semester, integrated country-specific recommendations

Ministers will exchange views on the country-specific recommendations (CSRs).

IIA implementation

The presidency will provide an update on the state of play of the implementation of the 2016 inter-institutional agreement on better law making (IIA BLM).

Rule of Law in Poland, Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Council will hold a hearing on article 7. The Commission and Poland will also provide updates on this issue and member states will be invited to pose questions to Poland on its response to the Commission’s concerns on the rule of law.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: June 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence (Earl Howe) and I plan to attend the Joint Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) with EU Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers on the morning of 25 June. I will attend a meeting of the FAC for Foreign Ministers only that afternoon. The FAC will be chaired by the High Representative and Vice-President (HRVP) of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Luxembourg.

The FAC will discuss security and defence issues including EU-NATO co-operation. Foreign Ministers will then discuss current foreign policy issues including Yemen, the Red sea and horn of Africa, Jordan, and the EU global strategy.

Security and defence

The Joint Council will have two sessions. The first will cover security and defence during which Ministers will discuss permanent structured co-operation, military
mobility, the European peace facility, and EU-NATO co-operation. The HRVP will refer to the March European Council’s tasking on hybrid threats and resilience, which will be discussed by leaders at the June European Council on 28 and 29 June.

The second session will be attended by the NATO Secretary-General, and will cover EU-NATO co-operation, preparation for the NATO summit, and military mobility.

Ministers are expected to approve Council conclusions on security and defence in the context of the EU global strategy.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Yemen

Ministers will discuss the latest developments in Yemen, and how the EU can best support the UN special envoy’s efforts to revitalise the political process and work towards the resumption of negotiations. The dire humanitarian situation will be central to the discussion, recognising the urgent need to prevent further deterioration. The impact of the conflict on regional security and stability will also be addressed. The FAC is expected to approve Council conclusions on Yemen.

Horn of Africa/Red sea

Ministers will discuss the importance of inter and intra-regional co-operation in delivering peace, stability, and economic growth in the Red sea and the horn of Africa, including co-ordinated support to Somalia, the resolution of conflict in South Sudan, and the management of water security. The FAC will consider the impact of regional conflict on Red sea shipping routes, and of climate change on existing humanitarian challenges in the horn of Africa. While acknowledging recent positive developments, the FAC will discuss the importance of reform towards greater political freedom and human rights in the region. The FAC is expected to approve Council conclusions on the horn of Africa and Red sea.

EU global strategy

The HRVP will present the second progress report on the implementation of the EU’s global strategy for the EU’s foreign and security policy that was presented to the European Council in June 2016.

Jordan

The FAC will discuss recent developments in Jordan, following country-wide protests and the appointment of a new Prime Minister and Government. The UK remains committed to supporting Jordanian stability and will continue to engage positively with the new Jordanian Government, supporting them to meet their commitments to economic reform.

Council conclusions

The FAC is also expected to adopt Council conclusions on Sahel/Mali.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Tomorrow, Friday 22 June, will mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush to the UK, carrying passengers from various islands across the Caribbean. The Windrush generation arrived in response to Britain’s invitation to help rebuild the country after the second world war. The Government value the contribution made to the UK by the Windrush generation and we are committed to do right by those who have faced difficulties in demonstrating their status under the immigration system.

I am leading a series of measures across my Department to help put things right. This includes launching a compensation scheme as quickly and as carefully as possible, to help redress what has gone wrong. The call for evidence for the scheme is now complete, and this has given individuals and community groups the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. A public consultation on the design of the compensation scheme will be opened in due course. We will be announcing details of the final scheme and how to apply as soon as possible after the public consultation has ended.

More widely, it is crucial for the Government to learn from what happened, and it is especially important to do so now. To do this we need to understand more about what happened, why it was not stopped sooner, and how we can ensure that it does not happen again. I have already announced that a thorough lessons learned review is under way within the Department to undertake this incredibly important task. In particular, the review will consider:

- how members of the Windrush generation came to be entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants;
- why that was not spotted sooner; and
- whether corrective measures are now in place.

I have said from the outset that the lessons learned review needs to have independent oversight to make sure that it is done properly. I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Wendy Williams to this role. Currently one of Her Majesty’s inspectors of constabulary, Wendy brings a wealth of experience, including through her legal background. She was formerly the chief Crown prosecutor for Northumbria and the north-east region. As an HM inspector of constabulary, she has substantial experience of the independent, rigorous and objective assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations of public bodies, in the public interest.

I am confident that she will bring those essential characteristics, as well as integrity to the review.

The review will take time to do properly. The terms of reference and methodology for the review will be made available to the House before the summer recess.

[HCWS789]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Prime Minister’s Trade Envoy

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has approved two new appointments to the trade envoy programme. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) has been appointed as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Libya and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Mozambique and Democratic Republic of Congo. These new appointments take the total number to 32 parliamentarians covering 63 markets. The Prime Minister’s trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, which supports the UK’s ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets.

[HCWS787]
WORK AND PENSIONS

Office for Nuclear Regulation Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Later today the Office for Nuclear Regulation’s Annual Report and Accounts for 2017-18 will be published. Having consulted the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who is accountable for nuclear security, and the Office for Nuclear Regulation, I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security. [HCWS784]
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Childhood Obesity: Plan for Action Chapter 2

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Today, Government have published the second Chapter to the Childhood Obesity Plan. This plan is informed by the latest evidence and sets a new national ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030.

A copy of the plan can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action-chapter-2.

[HCWS794]

TRANSPORT

Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill: Standing Order No. 83L

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the amendments tabled during the progress through the House of Commons for the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill.

[HCWS792]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payments

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I am pleased to inform the House that two review exercises will begin today. One with regard to the MH and RJ judgments and one for claimants whose main disabling condition is haemarthropathy. The first payments will be made in late summer.

The Secretary of State made a commitment to keep the House updated on MH. This statement is fulfilling that commitment and is the third update so far.

On 21 December 2017 the High Court handed down its judgment in the judicial review challenge against regulation 2(4) of the Social Security (Personal Independence Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 S.I. 2017/194. This regulation reversed the effect of the upper tribunal decision in MH. This decision broadened the interpretation about how symptoms of overwhelming psychological distress should be assessed for the purpose of mobility activity 1 in PIP.

The Secretary of State informed the House on 19 January 2018 that after careful consideration she would not be appealing the High Court judgment, in order to provide certainty to claimants. Since then the Department has been working at pace and taking the necessary steps required to implement the decision in MH.

I am pleased to tell the House that this work is now complete and I have today published the new guidance required in order to implement the change. The guidance can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-independence-payment-assessment-guide-for-assessment-providers.

On 2 November 2017 the Department published updated guidance following an upper tribunal judgment on RJ that was handed down on 9 March 2017 on how the Department considers a claimant to be carrying out an activity safely and whether they need supervision to do so. The review exercise will now also look back at PIP claims to consider whether an increase in entitlement should be awarded as a result of RJ.

In addition, the Department is also beginning a review of approximately 420 PIP cases where the main disabling condition is haemophilia to identify and review claimants with haemarthropathy, following feedback from external stakeholders that the functional needs of claimants with haemarthropathy were not being adequately assessed. We expect this exercise to be completed in six weeks.

I will continue to update the House.

[HCWS793]
Tuesday 26 June 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Members’ Correspondence: 2017

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I am today publishing a report on the performance of Departments and Agencies on handling correspondence from Members and Peers during the calendar year 2017. Details are set out in the table below. Correspondence statistics for 2016 can be found on 11 July 2017, Volume 627 (HCWS35).

Departmental figures are based on substantive replies unless otherwise indicated. The footnotes to the table provide general background information on how the figures have been compiled.

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### Correspondence from MP/Peers to Ministers and Agency Executives 2017 (*)

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(1) Departments and Agencies which received 10 MPs/Peers letters or fewer are not shown in this table. Holding or interim replies are not included unless otherwise indicated. The report does not include correspondence considered as Freedom of Information requests.

(2) The Valuation Office Agency is an executive agency, sponsored by HM Revenue & Customs.

[HCWS798]

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Affordable Housing**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our record on the provision of social housing is a strong one with over 378,000 affordable homes delivered since 2010. This included 273,000 homes for rent, and over 10,400 council homes built between 2010-11 and 2016-17, up from 2,920 over the previous 13 years.

The Government are committed to increasing support for more social housing. I am delighted to announce the launch of bidding for two flagship social housing programmes—additional funding for the affordable homes programme and an increase in housing revenue account borrowing. Together these will release over £2.6 billion of additional investment in those parts of the country where the need is greatest to help local authorities and housing associations build the homes that their communities need. Eligibility for this funding will be determined by the difference between private and social rents in local areas.

Today’s announcement confirms that £1.67 billion will be spent on delivering 23,000 additional affordable homes outside of London and could lever in total investment by housing associations and councils of up to £3.5 billion. This investment will help those who are struggling most, by delivering at least 12,500 homes for social rent in areas of the country where the difference between private and social rents are above average.

This announcement completes the allocation of the £9 billion affordable homes programme which will deliver at least 250,000 affordable homes by March 2022. At the spring statement we confirmed an additional £1.67 billion for London. The Government are also committed to a step change in council house building. I am today launching bidding for the £1 billion housing revenue account borrowing programme, announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at autumn Budget. We need a stronger, more diverse housing market, and this additional borrowing programme recognises the vital role that local authorities can play in building new homes to meet local needs. The additional borrowing will be split equally between London and the rest of the country, and at least £500 million will be available to London boroughs with London boroughs also eligible to bid for further funding from the remaining £500 million.

By opening up bidding, local authorities in areas where private sector rents are higher will be able to borrow more for new housing development between 2019-20 and 2021-22. Local authorities will have flexibility to consider the bidding routes most suited to their needs: additional borrowing only, or additional borrowing to be used alongside either unspent right to buy receipts or affordable homes programme grant.

I want to see eligible local authorities bidding into the programme, demonstrating their ambition and appetite...
to build new council homes, and showing how the sector can contribute to tackling the country’s housing needs. The additional borrowing programme will help to support the delivery of a new generation of council houses to fix our broken housing market.

I am placing a copy of the affordable homes programme addendum and the “Additional Housing Revenue Account Borrowing Programme: Prospectus for local authorities outside London” in the Library of the House.

This statement has also been made in the House of Lords.

[HCWS797]

**TRANSPORT**

Airports: National Policy Statement

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

On Monday the House of Commons debated the proposed airports national policy statement which I laid before Parliament on 5 June. Following the approval of the statement by the House, I am pleased to inform the House that I am today designating it as a national policy statement under the provisions of section 5(1) of the Planning Act 2008, and have arranged for publication as required by section 5(9)(a) of that Act.

The designation of the airports national policy statement marks a significant step forward. It provides the primary basis for decision making on development consent applications for a north-west runway at Heathrow airport, clarifying what is required to enable the development of much needed additional airport capacity that is essential for trade and economic growth, while setting clear requirements to mitigate the impacts on local communities and the environment.

The next step is for applicants to develop their plans, and then carry out further public consultation as required under the Act. Any application for development consent will of course be considered carefully and with an open mind based on the evidence provided, including through a public examination by the independent planning inspectorate, before a final decision is made.

[HCWS796]

**WORK AND PENSIONS**

Private Pensions

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):

Further to the Protecting Defined Benefit Pension Schemes White Paper published in March this year, the Government are today announcing the publication of a consultation to gather views on enhancing TPR’s powers. Proposals include higher fines and criminal offences for wilful and/or reckless behaviour that puts pension schemes at risk, as well as new powers to enable the regulator to intervene. The package aims to balance protection for pensions while not imposing unnecessary regulations on business.

We are seeking views on our proposals before we move to implement them at: https://getinvolved.dwp.gov.uk. The consultation will be online from today and will run until 21 August 2018.

[HCWS795]
The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I would like to inform the House of a change or revoke licences should the level of risk increase.

Under those restrictions it has been the British Government’s policy not to grant an export licence for any military or dual-use goods and technology being supplied to military end-users in Argentina, except in exceptional circumstances.

Our general position now will be to continue to refuse licences for export and trade of goods judged to enhance Argentine military capability. However, where like-for-like equipment is no longer available, we may grant licences where we judge they are not detrimental to the UK’s defence and security interests.

Licence applications for equipment and defence technology which meet the above criteria will still be assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria (the “consolidated criteria”).

The United Kingdom takes its export control responsibilities very seriously and operates one of the most robust export control regimes in the world. We rigorously examine every application on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, and remain prepared to suspend or revoke licences should the level of risk increase.

[HCWS799]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Pay Review Body and Agenda for Change Pay Deal

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 31st report of the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 9641). I am grateful to the chair and members of the NHSPRB for their report.


NHS staff do a fantastic job in delivering world-class care. Even with increasing pressures on the NHS due to, among other things, an ageing population and changing public expectations, they work incredibly hard, always putting patients first and keeping them safe while providing the high-quality care we all expect.

We have already announced that, to secure the future of the health service as it approaches its 70th birthday, we have increased NHS funding by an average 3.4% per year, which will see the NHS receive £20.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023.

The Government accept the NHSPRB’s observations and are very pleased to confirm their acceptance of the “Agenda For Change” multi-year pay and contract reform deal.

The new deal will see nearly 1 million NHS workers benefit over three years and help deliver better value for money from the £36 billion “Agenda For Change” pay bill, with some of the most important changes to working practices in a decade.

The deal includes a range of pay and non-pay proposals that will benefit staff and patients. Most NHS staff below the top of their pay band will benefit from pay increases through the restructuring of the pay bands—higher starting pay, removal of overlapping pay points and shorter pay scales.

From this year the lowest NHS starting salary will increase year on year from £15,404 to £18,005 in 2020-21. The starting salary of a nurse will rise to £24,907 in 2020-21, which will have a significant impact on retention and recruitment issues.

The deal also guarantees fair basic pay awards for the next three years to staff who are at the top of pay bands—a cumulative 6.5% over three years.

The agreement will put learning and development right at the heart of local annual appraisals, helping to improve the experience for staff, ensuring they demonstrate the required standards for their role before moving to the next pay point. We know that getting appraisals right helps improve staff engagement and through that better outcomes for patients. The deal also commits NHS employers to support staff to improve their physical and mental health, helping to reduce sickness absence, increasing capacity for patient care.

This is a major step forward. The agreement reflects the Government’s public sector pay policy that pay flexibility should be in return for reforms that improve recruitment and retention and boost productivity.

During the NHS trades unions consultation on the AFC framework agreement, the Department of Health and Social Care received a number of representations from non-statutory non-NHS organisations that provide NHS services seeking additional funding on the same basis as NHS bodies.

It is important to stress that the AFC reforms were those, based on the AFC employment contract (and all the terms and conditions) the NHS Staff Council agreed could help the NHS recruit, retain, motivate and boost the productivity/capacity of its workforce.
We know that there is a small number of non-statutory non-NHS organisations that provide NHS services, employ existing and new staff on the AFC contract and will be required to implement the reforms. I believe it is right that these organisations should receive a share of the additional funding made available for AFC staff employed by NHS bodies listed at annex 1 of the NHS terms and conditions of service handbook; each employing existing and new staff on the AFC contract are required to implement the deal and will need to meet the costs of doing so.

From 2018-19, the AFC pay deal will apply to existing and new staff on the AFC employment contract employed in both NHS bodies and non-statutory non-NHS organisations that provide NHS services, the terms and conditions of which are set out in the NHS terms and conditions of service handbook.

I have asked my officials to write directly to all NHS commissioners and provide them with further detail of the eligibility criteria for additional funding during the three years of the pay deal, that will apply to those non-statutory non-NHS providers of NHS services.

In line with the Chancellor’s commitment at Budget 2017, the Government will release the £800 million already set aside to support the pay deal for 2018-19 in England. Barnett consequential will flow to the devolved Administrations in the usual way. Following the recent announcement on the NHS long-term funding settlement, for the remaining two years of the deal (2019-20 to 2020-21) funding will be met from the settlement. The long-term settlement will provide the NHS with increased funding of £20.5 billion per year in real terms by the end of five years.

[HCWS803]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Drugs Policy

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): On 18 June, I announced the creation of an expert panel to advise Ministers on individual applications to prescribe cannabis-based medicinal products. As of today, the panel is now accepting applications, and will meet for the first time later this week. The clinical panel will be chaired by the chief medical officer for Northern Ireland, Dr Michael McBride. Further members of the panel will be announced this week.

Clinicians must be at the heart of the process. The panel will consider applications from GMC registered practitioners who are listed on the relevant specialist register and with an active licence to practise. These applications must be countersigned by a medical director or an equivalent. This will provide the reassurance that prescribing these currently unlicensed and potentially untested products is in the best interests of the patient. Applications will not be accepted from members of the public.

The panel will assess applications against several criteria. These include:

Evidence of exceptional clinical circumstances, in line with existing principles applied to individual funding requests within the NHS; or,

Whether there is evidence from existing clinical trials or other clinical data which indicate that a patient will benefit from a cannabis-based medicinal product; or,

Whether the clinician considers there is an otherwise unmet special clinical need that could be addressed through use of a cannabis-based medicinal product by the patient.

In considering these criteria, the panel will be assessing whether the attending clinician, who has the responsibility for the case, is making an evidence-based and reasonable request for a specific case. The panel cannot make clinical decisions for a patient not under their care. The full terms of reference and criteria, along with details for clinicians on how to apply, are available on gov.uk.

The panel will not be responsible for issuing licences: only the Home Secretary or the Department of Health in Northern Ireland can give the formal approval of a schedule 1 licence—both, however, will have due regard to the panel’s recommendations.

As I and the Home Secretary made clear last week, we will be led by clinical decision making. To streamline the application process as much as possible, for applications made through the expert panel to prescribe cannabis-based medicinal products, the Government will not require a site visit unless absolutely necessary. The Government will also not require a fresh DBS check from clinicians, or other individuals involved in the treatment of a patient involving a cannabis-based medicinal product, where they are practising under an existing DBS check. Waiving these requirements will ensure that any application for a licence submitted following consideration by the expert panel, where a visit and fresh DBS check are not required, can expect to receive a drug licensing decision within two to four weeks. Should the panel be presented with an emergency case, the panel will consider cases as quickly as is necessary dependent on the medical circumstances.

The Government are also committed to reviewing the fees paid for licences that are awarded as a result of the advice of the expert panel. That review will take place urgently and will conclude before summer recess, with any legislation laid before the House at the first available date following its conclusion. In the meantime, for applications for a licence made by the NHS, neither individual patients nor their families will be asked to make any financial contribution towards the cost of any licence that may be issued.

On 19 June, the Home Secretary announced a two-phase review looking at the scheduling of cannabis. Part one of the review will consider the available evidence of the medicinal and therapeutic benefits of cannabis and cannabis-based products. Professor Dame Sally Davies will take this part forward. If part one concludes that there is evidence of medicinal and therapeutic benefit, then part two will consider the appropriate schedule for cannabis-related products, based on the balance of harms and public health requirements. Part two will be led by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), with clinical input as required. The ACMD will not reassess the evidence issued by Professor Dame Sally Davies which I have received today.

[HCWS802]
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UK Support to UNRWA

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The UK remains firmly committed to supporting Palestinian refugees across the near east. The UK recognises the UN Relief and Works Agency’s (UNRWA) important mandate from the UN General Assembly to support and protect Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA is a necessary humanitarian and stabilising force across the near east, providing millions of Palestinian refugees with hope and opportunities every day. Its basic services, including food, education and healthcare, provide a life-line to the 5 million and more Palestinian men, women and child refugees across the region, and enable them to live in dignity until a negotiated peace agreement.

The UK is concerned about the possibility of service suspension as a result of the exceptional funding deficit that UNRWA is facing this year. The Syrian conflict has caused more than 50,000 Palestinian refugees to be on the move again, and increasing numbers of refugees are food insecure and vulnerable to shocks. Recent violence in Gaza has added to the burden on UNRWA’s health services. UNRWA’s work has never been more critical.

In the face of these pressures, the UK has committed to deliver its next round of financial support earlier than originally planned to help meet the growing needs of Palestinian refugees across the region. We will disburse £38.5 million to the agency in recognition of the severity of the deficit and the importance of service delivery. This includes £28.5 million that I committed at the UNRWA Rome pledging conference earlier this year, and £10 million of funding that the UK is bringing forward from next year’s budget in response to the exceptional cash flow challenges UNRWA is facing.

The UK will continue to work closely with UNRWA to reach a secure and sustainable financial footing. We have welcomed UNRWA’s efforts to become ever more efficient and cost-effective, and are committed to working closely with them, host authorities, and fellow donors to maintain a realistic and achievable pace of reform.

We communicated the UK’s ongoing support to the UN Secretary-General at an UNRWA pledging conference in New York on 25 June. We were pleased that 20 donors announced contributions, or their intention to contribute, to the 2018 budget of UNRWA. I will continue to urge the international community to come together to ensure that UNRWA can maintain its essential work and find ways to ensure continuity of essential services to Palestinian refugees.

While the support and services provided by UNRWA are essential, ultimately there needs to be a just, fair, agreed, and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question as part of a negotiated peace agreement. The UK is firmly committed to a two-state solution to provide the long-term answer for Palestinian refugees.

Peace will come only through fresh negotiations between the parties, supported by the international community. It is critical that both Israelis and Palestinians return to direct negotiations and urgently prioritise steps to resolve the situation in Gaza. The UK remains firmly committed to this process.

JUSTICE

Female Offender Strategy

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today, I am launching the Government’s female offender strategy following our commitment in the November 2016 “Prison Safety and Reform” White Paper.

If we are to make any significant difference for victims, families and wider society, we must break the cycle of reoffending by taking the necessary steps to understand and address the underlying causes of offending.

The evidence tells us that vulnerability is not just a consequence of crime, it is also a driver of offending behaviour, preventing many from breaking out of a cycle of reoffending.

There is also growing evidence that short custodial sentences do not work in terms of rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. Short sentences generate churn which is a major driver of instability in our prisons and they do not provide sufficient time for rehabilitative activity, especially when we also know that many of these offenders have complex needs and vulnerabilities. In most cases, we know that the best way to meet those needs is to help people get access to the services they need in the community.

Female offenders can be among the most vulnerable of all, in both the prevalence and complexity of their needs. Many experience chaotic lifestyles involving substance misuse, mental health problems, homelessness and offending behaviour, which are often the product of a life of abuse and trauma. Of those female offenders who are in custody, many are sentenced for nonviolent, low-level and trauma. Of those female offenders who are in custody, many are sentenced for nonviolent, low-level but persistent offences, often for short periods of time.

If we take the right approach to female offenders—one that addresses vulnerability, follows the evidence about what works in supporting them to turn their lives around, and treats them as individuals of value—it could have substantial benefits for victims, families, and offenders themselves.

This strategy sets out the Government’s commitment to a new programme of work for female offenders, driven by our vision to see:

fewer women coming into the criminal justice system;
fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully; and
better conditions for those in custody.

To achieve this, we are shifting our focus from custody to the community. Across Government, we are investing £5 million funding over two years in community provision.
for women. We are committing to working with partners to assess options for delivering a “residential women’s centres” pilot in at least five sites across England and Wales. We want to build the evidence base about what are effective, sustainable and scalable options in the community for diverting women from entering and re-entering custody on short custodial sentences. We will not be proceeding with plans to build five new community prisons for Women.

Given that a higher proportion of women have dependent children living with them prior to imprisonment, incarceration of women may have a disproportionate impact on families and children and increase the risk of intergenerational offending. That is why we are commissioning Lord Farmer to continue his work on the importance of family ties in improving outcomes for offenders, by conducting a further review into female offenders.

Only through effective partnerships, at both a national and local level, which take a holistic approach to tackling the causes underlying the behaviour of female offenders, can progress really happen. That is why the strategy outlines a framework for taking this forward with partners, one which is locally-led, partnership-focused and evidence-based.

As part of this, we will work across Government and with other national and local partners to develop a national concordat on female offenders, which will set out how services should be working together in partnership to identify and respond to the often multiple and complex needs of women involved in the criminal justice system.

We must ensure we are accountable for the priorities set out in this strategy. Therefore, we will publish an annual update on the progress of the work of the strategy and reform the Advisory Board on Female Offenders to give it a greater role in monitoring the delivery of commitments in this strategy.

The female offender strategy is available in full at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy

[HCWS800]
Written Statements
Thursday 28 June 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): In its written ministerial statement of 11 January 2018, Official Report, column 9WS, the Government set out their commitment to put in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom. As made clear in a further written ministerial statement of 26 March 2018, the UK will take legal responsibility for its own nuclear safeguards regime when Euratom safeguards arrangements no longer apply.

The necessary measures include the negotiation of new bilateral safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). I am pleased to announce that on 7 June 2018 the UK and the IAEA signed these new agreements—a voluntary offer agreement and additional protocol—and we intend to bring these to Parliament for ratification this autumn. The new agreements will replace the current trilateral agreements between the UK, the IAEA and Euratom.

The conclusion of these agreements marks the successful achievement of a major Euratom exit milestone and an important step towards ensuring business continuity for the civil nuclear sector once Euratom arrangements cease to apply to the UK.

On 26 June 2018, the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, which provides the necessary powers to establish a domestic nuclear safeguards regime, received Royal Assent. The passage of this Bill marks another important Euratom exit milestone and paves the way for the secondary legislation, on which the Government will be publicly consulting over the summer, to be put in place before the end of March 2019.

The Government have also progressed their discussions on nuclear co-operation agreements (NCAs) with priority countries to ensure continuity for the civil nuclear sector. On 4 May 2018 the UK signed a bilateral NCA with the United States of America, and remains on track to have bilateral agreements with all priority countries in place when Euratom arrangements cease to apply to the UK.

In parallel with the above, the Government are negotiating with the EU on the UK’s separation from, and future relationship with, Euratom. The UK and EU have now reached agreement on all Euratom related articles of the draft withdrawal agreement. The relevant text has therefore been finalised.

There is more detail on these matters in the second quarterly update which has today been provided to Parliament by way of a report. The paper will be placed in the Libraries of the House. As Royal Assent of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill was received on 26 June, the content and timing of these reporting updates to Parliament will be determined by the relevant provisions of that legislation.

[HCWS809]

Industrial Strategy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As part of the industrial strategy, the Government committed to making the most of the UK’s strengths, so we can develop the technologies that will transform existing industries and create better, higher-paying jobs in every part of the United Kingdom. The nuclear sector is an undoubted strength of our economy and one of the most advanced in the world, from research, fuel production, generation through to decommissioning, waste management, transport and our world-class regulatory system—it is an industry which offers huge opportunity for the future.

Sector deals, where industries are invited to come forward with plans for their future, embody the ethos of our collaborative approach. They show how industry and the Government, working together, can boost the productivity and earning power of specific sectors. We have already struck ambitious deals with the artificial intelligence, life sciences, automotive and creative industries sectors and we look forward to building on this in the months ahead.

The Government have worked closely with the sector champion Lord Hutton and industry leads from the Nuclear Industry Council to develop a number of proposals by 2030, which include:

- 30% cost reduction in the cost of new build projects
- Savings of 20% in the cost of decommissioning compared with current estimates
- Women to make up 40% of the nuclear sector by 2030
- Win up to £2 billion domestic and international contracts

The deal contains mutual commitments to drive greater productivity, innovation and exports by: adopting innovative advanced manufacturing and construction techniques in new nuclear projects; supporting advanced nuclear technologies including small modular reactors (SMRs) and a range of research and development activities; a joint review of the decommissioning pipeline to achieve greater value for the taxpayer and to boost exports; a supply chain competitiveness programme to support UK business to build capabilities to win work domestically and internationally; and a range of proposals to support a future workforce including a new apprenticeship standard and a commitment to a more diverse workforce, including a target of women making up 40% of the nuclear sector by 2030.

The UK has consistently been a world leader in nuclear technology and has been at the forefront of many new developments in the industry. This deal will continue that tradition through the establishment of a new framework to support the development and deployment of SMRs and the innovative technologies that support them. This support is designed to challenge the industry to bring forward technically and commercially viable propositions that would lead to the deployment of new reactors that would be investable and cost competitive in the energy system. This builds on the package announced in December 2017 of up to £44 million for research and development funding (up to £4 million in phase 1 and, subject to Government approval, up to £40 million for phase 2) for “advanced” modular reactors. I am pleased to announce that the following companies have made credible propositions from a range of UK and international concepts and will receive grant funding to undertake detailed studies:
The Government now intend to consult in the coming months on reforms to the annual canvass based on the pilot findings. We believe a hybrid model, incorporating the most successful elements of each of the models piloted, will be the most beneficial in achieving the aims of reform. We intend to publish a policy statement later this year setting out the plans and asking for feedback from all interested parties.

The pilots show the benefits of engaging closely with stakeholders, who are best placed to shape a system that works for everyone. We are indebted to the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Scottish Assessors Association for their collaboration to date and look forward to this continuing throughout the development and implementation of these reforms.

Our intention is for reforms to be introduced across Great Britain. As elements of electoral registration are devolved in Scotland and Wales, reforms will need to be introduced jointly. We are therefore working closely with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. The publication of the evidence from the pilots is an important milestone that will help underpin this collaboration.

I am placing a copy of the evaluation report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS805]

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Building Safety Update**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Today, my Department has published the “Building Safety Programme: monthly data release” for June. This updates data on the identification, testing and remediation programme for aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding systems on high-rise buildings. I wanted to update the House on the further steps my Department is taking to ensure this work is completed as effectively and swiftly as possible.

Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government have been working closely with local authorities and fire and rescue services to identify and make safe high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding as a matter of urgency.
Through the Government-funded testing programme at Building Research Establishment (BRE), which has been made available at no cost to all local authorities, housing associations, and public and private sector building owners, 314 buildings have been identified as having unsafe cladding. Of these, 159 are social housing, 14 are public buildings, and 141 are private residential buildings.

For high-rise buildings in the private sector, my predecessor wrote to local authorities last summer asking them to identify all privately owned buildings with potentially unsafe cladding. We have provided local authorities with £1.3 million to assist in this process. As part of this work, local authorities have been collecting information on ACM buildings in their areas which have not been tested at BRE. This effort from local authorities has resulted in them assessing over 6,000 high-rise private sector buildings. They have now identified an additional 156 private sector high-rise residential buildings with unsafe cladding. Adding these to the 141 already identified by BRE testing brings the total to 297 private sector high-rise residential buildings identified as having ACM cladding that is unlikely to meet current building regulations guidance.

We are confident that, through this testing and the hard work of local authorities, we have identified all social housing with unsafe ACM cladding systems in England. However, beyond the 297 confirmed private sector buildings, the cladding status of approximately 170 private sector residential buildings remains outstanding. For all but a handful of these buildings, local authorities have commenced enforcement action to obtain the necessary information from owners who are responsible for ensuring safety. Based on current evidence, and the identification rate to date, we expect 3% to 5% of the remaining buildings to have similar ACM cladding systems to those which have failed large-scale system tests. Address details for these buildings have been passed to local fire and rescue services, which are prioritising visits to those buildings to confirm appropriate fire safety measures are in place.

In the private sector, local authorities are checking actions being taken to remediate buildings and have told us about plans for 72 of the private sector buildings identified to date. Of these, 21 have started remediation, and four of these have been completed. Remediation work has also started on 70% of the social sector buildings, and the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of unsafe ACM cladding systems on residential social housing buildings 18 metres and above owned by social landlords, with costs estimated at £400 million.

In the light of this updated information, I am taking the following steps:

A new ministerially-chaired taskforce is being established to actively oversee the remediation of private sector buildings with ACM cladding systems. The taskforce will be charged with ensuring that remediation plans are put in place swiftly across all private sector buildings with ACM cladding systems, addressing any barriers or identifying any additional support required to achieve this. Membership of this taskforce will include the Local Government Association (LGA), the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), London councils, local authorities who have experienced the largest degree of impact and industry representatives.

The LGA and NFCC are convening a joint expert inspection team to help local authorities on the ground. This team will support local authorities in ensuring and, where necessary, enforcing remediation of private sector high-rise residential buildings with unsafe ACM cladding systems. To support the work of the inspection team, I am making up to £1 million available to support local authorities on further enforcement steps and the Department is also developing further statutory guidance for local authorities to enhance their use of existing Housing Act powers in relation to fire safety hazards associated with cladding on high-rise residential buildings.

Following my recent roundtable with industry representatives, I have responded to their suggestions by inviting them to develop industry-led solutions to deliver remediation, exploring all options to protect leaseholders from additional costs. At a further meeting in July, I will expect industry to present their proposals with a view to agreeing next steps. I rule out no options if industry and individual building owners of developers do not come forward with their own solutions. In the meantime, I will continue to explore other routes for protecting leaseholders. These may include: supporting local authorities to take more targeted action to identify and remediate affected buildings and recovering costs from those responsible for ensuring the safety of buildings; and supporting leaseholder enfranchisement.

My Department is writing to all relevant private sector building owners to remind them of their responsibility to make their buildings safe. This includes: confirming to the relevant local authority whether they have ACM cladding systems if they have not yet done so; implementing any necessary interim safety measures and permanently remediating their buildings, reminding them that local authorities have powers to enforce these improvements if building owners do not take action; and setting out my expectation that they should explore all options to protect leaseholders from incurring the costs associated with replacing unsafe cladding.

Building owners are responsible for ensuring the safety of their buildings and their residents. Government and local authorities will monitor and hold them to account for this where they have unsafe ACM cladding systems. The Government continue to drive forward these steps as a priority, with the aim that residents are safe in their homes and that they feel safe.


PRIME MINISTER

ISC Detainee Reports

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The Government agreed with the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) in December 2013 that it would inquire into the themes and issues identified in Sir Peter Gibson’s detainee inquiry report, take further evidence and produce a report. The ISC has now concluded its work and its report on detainee mistreatment and rendition issues has today been laid in Parliament. It is in two parts: the first on the period 2001 to 2010; the second on current issues.

The Government welcome the publication of the ISC’s reports. It is important to begin by noting the context in which the Government, including the security and intelligence agencies and armed forces, was working in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the deployments of armed forces personnel to Iraq and
Afghanistan. The UK responded, alongside its international partners, to the tragic events of 9/11 with the aim of doing everything possible to prevent further loss of innocent life, both here and overseas. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the priority again was preventing loss of life.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that UK personnel were working within a new and challenging operating environment for which, in some cases, they were not prepared. It took too long to recognise that guidance and training for staff was inadequate, and too long to understand fully and take appropriate action on the risks arising from our engagement with international partners on detainee issues. The agencies responded to what they thought were isolated allegations and incidents of mistreatment, but the ISC concludes that they should have realised the extent to which others were using unacceptable practices as part of a systematic programme. The agencies acknowledge that they did not fully understand this quickly enough and they regret not doing so.

UK personnel are bound by applicable principles of domestic and international law. The Government do not participate in, solicit, encourage or condone the use of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (CIDT) for any purpose. The ISC has noted, in the context of its historical report, a number of cases where intelligence and armed forces personnel are alleged to have threatened individuals in foreign detention. Such alleged behaviour is clearly unacceptable and the ISC’s current issues report recognises that improvements have been made to operational processes, fostering a greater awareness of risks and establishing enhanced oversight in relation to detainee issues.

Since 2010, UK intelligence and armed forces personnel have operated under the published consolidated guidance. It provides direction for UK personnel and governs their interaction with detainees held by others overseas and the handling of intelligence derived from them. As the ISC acknowledges, very few countries in the world have attempted to set out their approach to these matters, and let themselves be held accountable in this manner, and it is to the security and intelligence agencies’ and Ministry of Defence’s credit that they have embedded these procedures and ensure that their personnel follow them carefully when dealing with detainees held by others. It is coupled with a world-leading independent oversight regime, underpinned by the Justice and Security Act 2013 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. This has given enhanced powers to the Intelligence and Security Committee to oversee the activities of the security and intelligence agencies, alongside the statutory role of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, Sir Adrian Fulford.

Working closely with international partners is an essential part of keeping this country and its people safe. In doing so UK personnel seek assurances from those countries on their treatment of individuals and make clear the UK’s position on torture and CIDT. Detainee-related work remains important and at times difficult, but intelligence and armed forces personnel are now much better placed to meet that challenge. The lessons from what happened in the aftermath of the appalling terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 are to be found in improved operational policy and practice, better guidance and training, and an enhanced oversight and legal framework. We should be proud of the work done by our intelligence and service personnel, often in the most difficult circumstances, but it is only right that they should be held to the highest possible standards in protecting our national security.

The Government will give further consideration to the ISC’s conclusions and recommendations, noting that it has expressed a number of concerns about the consolidated guidance, but has said that these should be read in the spirit of continuous improvement. Formal oversight responsibility for the consolidated guidance rests with the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, following my direction to him under section 230 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, with effect from 1 September 2017. I am therefore inviting Sir Adrian to make proposals to the Government about how the guidance could be improved, taking account of the ISC’s views and those of civil society.

The Government will consider the reports in full and respond formally in due course.

[HCWS808]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 21 June 2018 in Luxembourg. The Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

Three legislative proposals achieved general approach at the Council. These were the proposed revision of regulations on co-ordination of social security systems (883/04 and 987/09); the directive on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union 16018/17; and the directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council directive 2010/18/E.

The Council also discussed the European semester. As part of this agenda item, the Council approved draft Council recommendations on the national reform programmes 2018 of each member state; endorsed the opinions of the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) on the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) and the implementation of the 2017 CSRs; and adopted a proposal on guidelines for the employment policies of the member states.

There were a number of progress reports and information items during the Council. These included an update on proposals for an equal treatment directive, the proposed European Labour Authority, and an overview of the Commission’s plans for the future European social fund plus (ESF+) and European globalisation adjustment fund (EGAF).

The Council closed with updates on the status of other legislative files, broader developments in the field of employment and social policy, and an overview of the priorities of the incoming Austrian presidency.

[HCWS806]
The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I am today laying a proposed draft remedial order to amend the Jobseekers (Back to Work Schemes) Act 2013.

The proposed draft remedial order ensures the right to a fair hearing for a small group of jobseekers who had a live appeal against a sanction decision made under the Jobseeker’s Allowance (Employment, Skills and Enterprise Schemes) Regulations 2011 (“the ESE regulations”) when the 2013 Act came into force. It enables the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to change this sanction decision and refund the amount withheld, without those affected individuals having to continue with their appeal.

In 2013, the courts ruled that the Jobseeker’s Allowance (Employment, Skills and Enterprise Schemes) Regulations 2011 that underpinned a range of programmes of support to help people into work did not describe the individual schemes in enough detail, and that our referral letters did not say enough about the activities required. The 2013 Act reinstated the original policy intent of these regulations. This ensured that jobseekers who had failed to take all reasonable steps to increase their chances of finding work between 2011 and 2013 did not unfairly obtain advantage over claimants who complied with the benefit conditionality requirements.

The Court of Appeal has since ruled that the 2013 Act is effective.

The 2013 Act did not prevent people from appealing if they felt they had a good reason for not participating in one of the employment schemes, but it meant their appeal would be unsuccessful if it related to their compliance with the 2011 regulations or the referral notification letters they received. The Court of Appeal has ruled that the Act has prevented claimants who had an appeal for failing to comply with the 2011 regulations still in the tribunal system on 26 March 2013 from having a fair hearing. For this small, specific group, the Court found that the Act is incompatible with article 6 of the European convention on human rights. The proposed draft remedial order addresses the Court of Appeal’s decision but does not affect the continuing validity of the 2013 Act.

I am using the non-urgent remedial order process to allow time for parliamentary scrutiny. The next 60 sitting days are a consultation period for Members of both Houses to send me any views. The order will also be scrutinised by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and it will write a report. I will consider all representations I receive on the proposed draft order, and the Committee’s report. Once I have done so, I will revert to both Houses with a draft of the remedial order for consideration for a further 60 days.

[HCWS807]
Petition

Monday 25 June 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Closure of Solihull Police Station

The petition of residents of Solihull,

Declares that local residents have great concern over the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner’s proposals to close Solihull Police Station.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to reconsider his proposals to close Solihull Police Station.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Knight, Official Report, 5 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 279.]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):

Prior to the police funding settlement, I spoke to each police leader from each force in England and Wales. The Government understand that police demand is changing and becoming increasingly complex. We have responded by providing a comprehensive funding settlement which increases total investment in the police system by over £460 million in 2018-19. This includes increased funding to tackle counter-terrorism and increased funding for local policing through Council Tax precept.

The 2018-19 settlement is resulting in an increase in funding for West Midlands Police of £9.9 million this year to £534.3 million. This increase in funding reflected the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner’s (PCC) decision to use flexibility to increase precept provided by the Government. The West Midlands (PCC) held £106 million resource reserves in March 2017 (20.2% of total cash funding), an increase of £26.9 million from 2011.

It is important for forces to make best use of available resources including making efficient use of front counters. I understand that the West Midlands PCC has stated that of the 24 stations set to close in the West Midlands over the next six years, only two are currently open to the public—Sutton Coldfield and Solihull. He has said that this will free up £5 million a year to invest in improving police buildings and will protect 100 officer posts. The PCC has also given an undertaking that no police station that is currently open to the public will close without being replaced by a building nearby.

However, the Government appreciate the residents of Solihull’s concerns regarding the decision of the West Midlands PCCs to close Solihull police station in late 2020. As I said in the House on 6 March, this decision is an active choice made by the West Midlands PCC and he has to make an argument to the public about why this decision is being taken. It is clear that Mr Jamieson has failed to take the people with him on the sensitive issue of police stations with public counters and I urge him once again to engage with the people whom he serves.
Petitions

Thursday 28 June 2018

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of South West Surrey,

Declares that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated; further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidelines and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

The petition of residents of Cheadle constituency,

Declares that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated; further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidelines and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mary Robinson.]
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 19 June 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY
Draft Scotland Act 2016 and Wales Act 2017 (Onshore Petroleum) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2018

The following is an extract from the Second Delegated Legislation Committee on the Draft Scotland Act 2016 and Wales Act 2017 (Onshore Petroleum) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2018 on 4 June 2018.

Claire Perry: I am told that the Territorial Sea Act sets baselines and that within 12 nautical miles is regarded as onshore. [Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 4 June 2018, c. 8.]

Letter of correction from Claire Perry:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) in Second Delegated Legislation Committee on 4 June.

The correct response should have been:

Claire Perry: I am told that the Territorial Sea Act sets baselines and that within those baselines is regarded as onshore.

EDUCATION
National Funding Formula: Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the National Funding Formula: Social Mobility on 22 May 2018.

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 between 2010 and 2015. Since then, funding has been maintained in real terms.

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the National Funding Formula: Social Mobility on 22 May 2018.

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. [Official Report, 22 May 2018, Vol. 641, c. 328WH.]

Letter of correction from Nick Gibb:

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) in the Westminster Hall debate.

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, invest £23 billion on capital funding for schools between 2016-17 and 2020-21, and fund an increase of 825,000 school places to deal with the increasing pupil population.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 25 June 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Rolls-Royce Redundancies

The following is an extract from the urgent question on Rolls-Royce Redundancies on 14 June 2018.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement on the announcement by Rolls-Royce of 4,600 redundancies over the next two years.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Rolls-Royce is one of our most important companies. It is a world leader in new technology, and plays a vital role in our industrial strategy. I spoke to Warren East, the chief executive, yesterday evening. Mr East explained that the company’s view is that the job losses are a necessary part of a drive to make the business more efficient and therefore more competitive. The jobs are principally in management and corporate support facilities rather than engineering and operational roles. Rolls-Royce has informed me that the announcement does not reflect a reduction in growth by the company; indeed, it reflects the reverse. It has a growing order book amounting to more than £170 billion, and Mr East told me that it would need more staff directly employed in both the manufacture of components and assembly to meet that demand.

The following is an extract from the urgent question on Defence Fire and Rescue Project: Capita on 21 June 2018.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the awarding of the defence fire and rescue contract to Capita.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record the justification for the awarding of the contract. The defence fire and rescue project has been examining potential improvements in how fire and rescue services are provided to the Ministry of Defence, both here in the United Kingdom and overseas. The total value of defence fire and rescue operations is around £1.3 billion. We intend to award a 12-year contract worth around £400 million to Capita Business Services Ltd. However, this is open to possible challenges—the normal process ensues—following the issuing of the contract award decision notice and possible parliamentary challenges to the contingent liability.

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Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 27 June 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on Tuesday 26 June 2018.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Yesterday the Foreign Office, rather pathetically, used the cover story of a trip to Africa to throw the media off the Foreign Secretary’s scent. Can I suggest to the Minister that his boss makes a real trip to Africa to focus urgently on the violence in western Cameroon, the instability gripping the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the danger that next month’s elections in Zimbabwe will not be free, fair or democratic?

Mark Field: May I point out that the Foreign Secretary has visited Africa on no fewer than nine occasions during the past year? Although I assume there will not be too many difficult votes to be dealt with during the course of the year ahead, I am sure he will have that sort of commitment. The hon. Lady rightly points out that, in places like Cameroon and the DRC, we are highly respected as a Government and will continue to be so.

Letter of correction from Mark Field:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: May I point out that the Foreign Secretary has visited Africa on no fewer than four occasions during the past year? Although I assume there will not be too many difficult votes to be dealt with during the course of the year ahead, I am sure he will have that sort of commitment. The hon. Lady rightly points out that, in places like Cameroon and the DRC, we are highly respected as a Government and will continue to be so.